Guitar MAGAZINE

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LOCKDOWN ESSENTIALS FOR GUITARISTS

INTERVIEW & STYLE FILE
JARED JAMES NICHOLS

NEW BORN

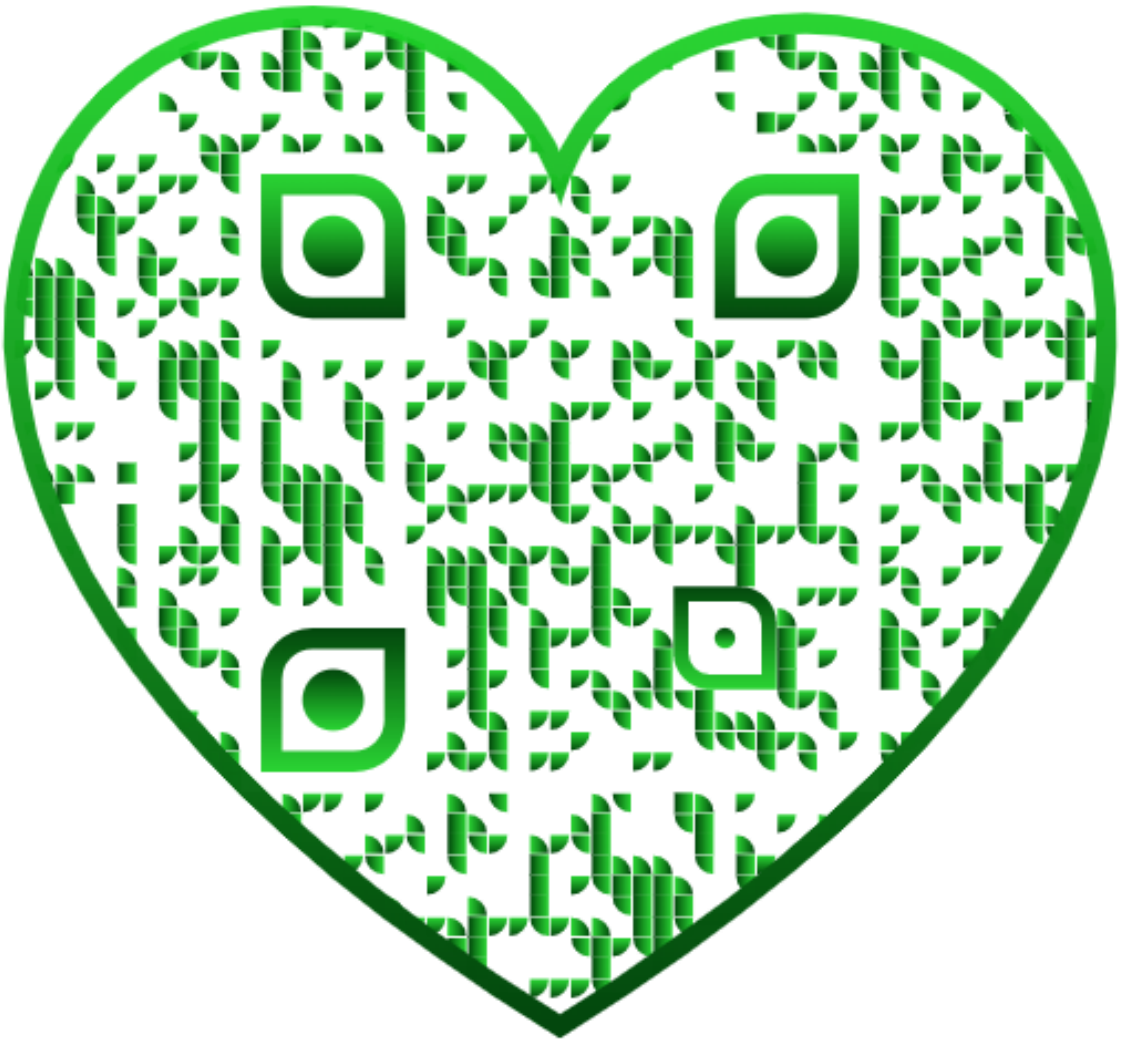
MATT BELLAMY
ON MANSON GUITAR WORKS, HIS NEW SIGNATURE MODEL AND THE FUTURE OF MUSE

PLUS

NEW GEAR
FENDER, GRETSCH BLACKSTAR ATKIN & PRS

BRIAN RAY'S 1957 GOLDTOP

WIN!
WALRUS AUDIO GEAR WORTH OVER £200



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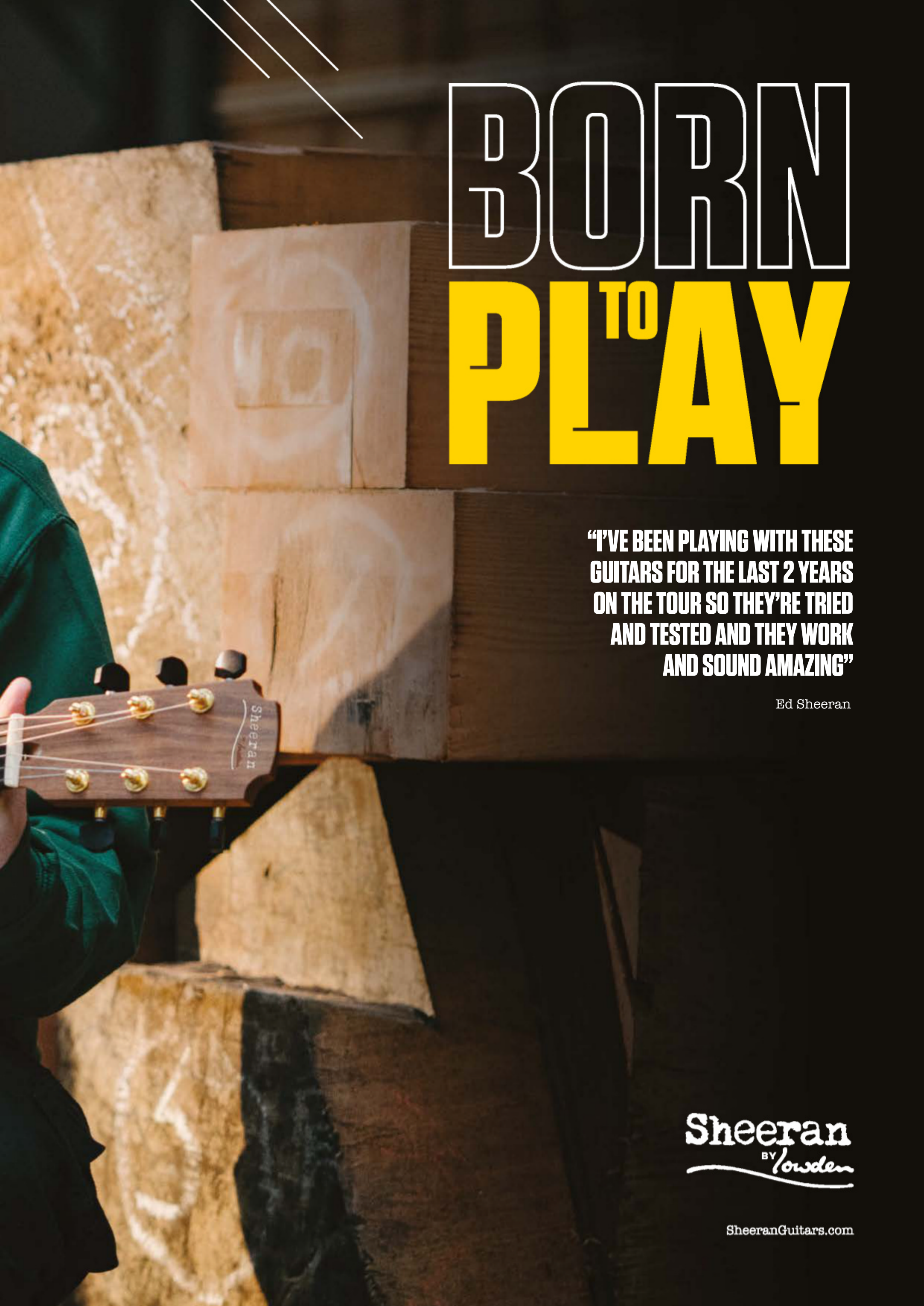

BORN TO PLAY

"I'VE BEEN PLAYING WITH THESE GUITARS FOR THE LAST 2 YEARS ON THE TOUR SO THEY'RE TRIED AND TESTED AND THEY WORK AND SOUND AMAZING"

Ed Sheeran

Sheeran BY Lowden

SheeranGuitars.com

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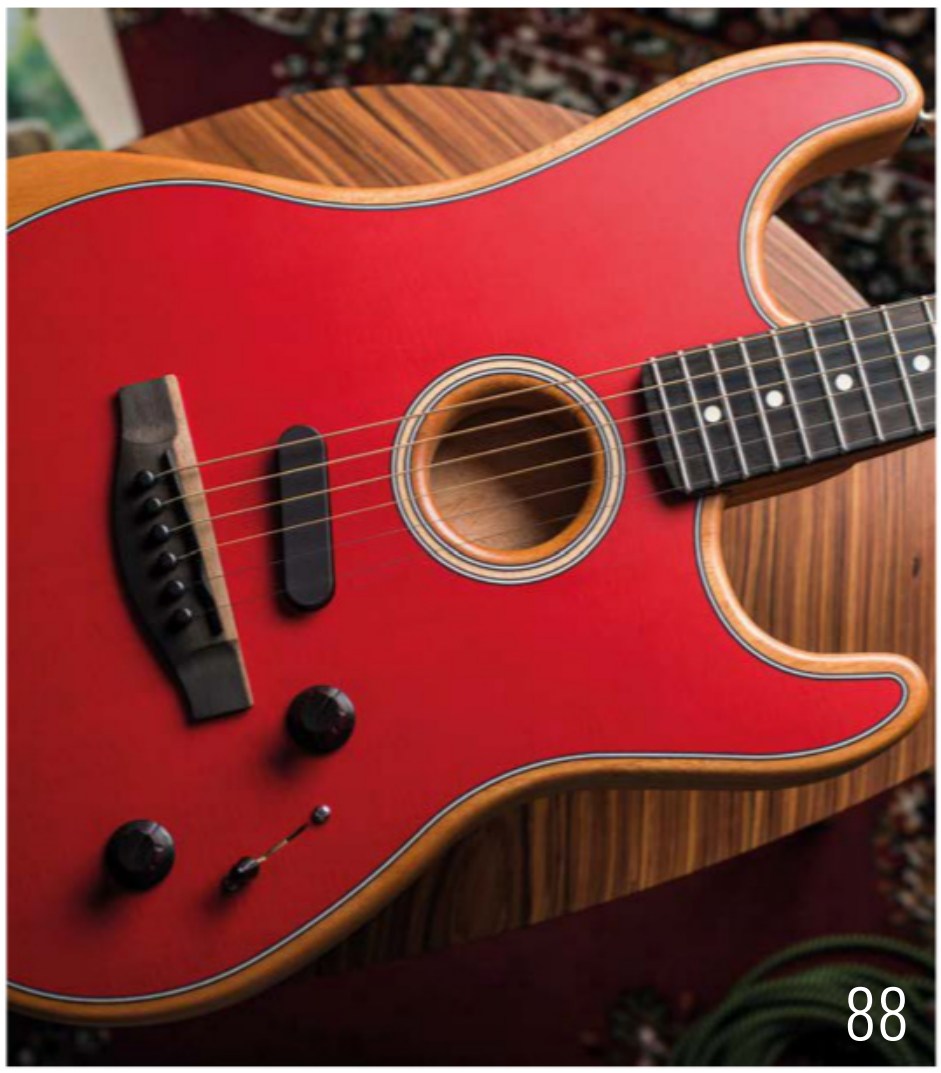
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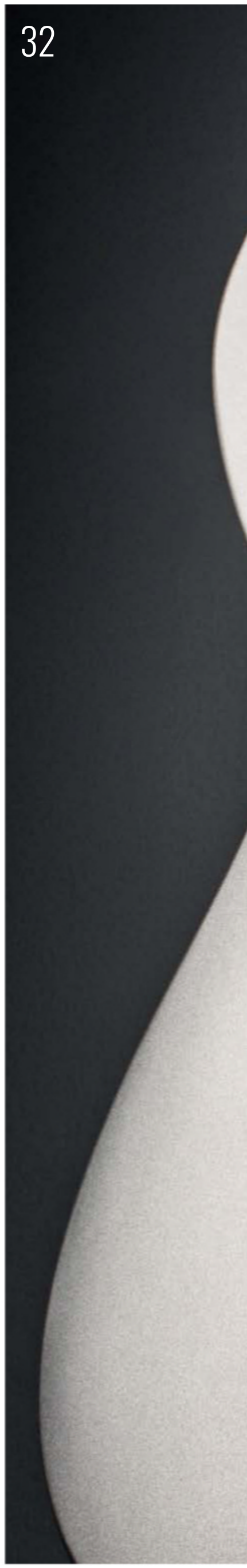
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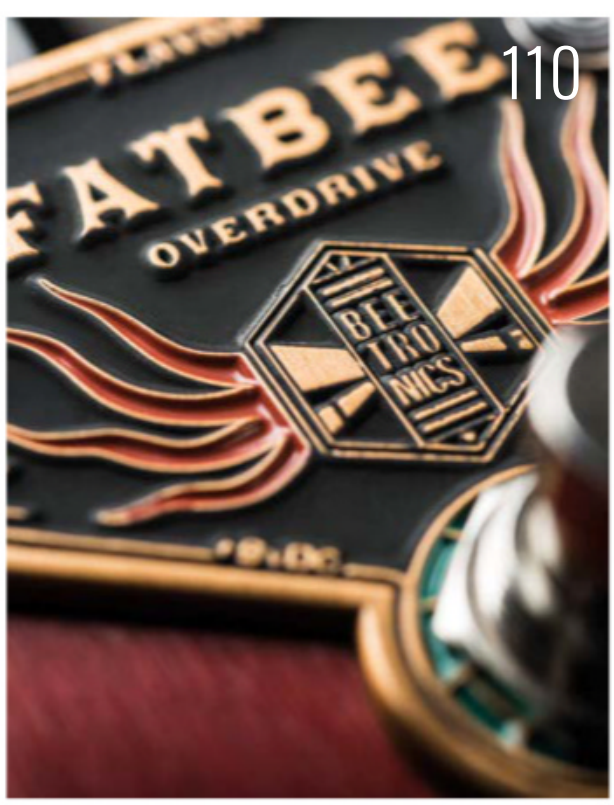

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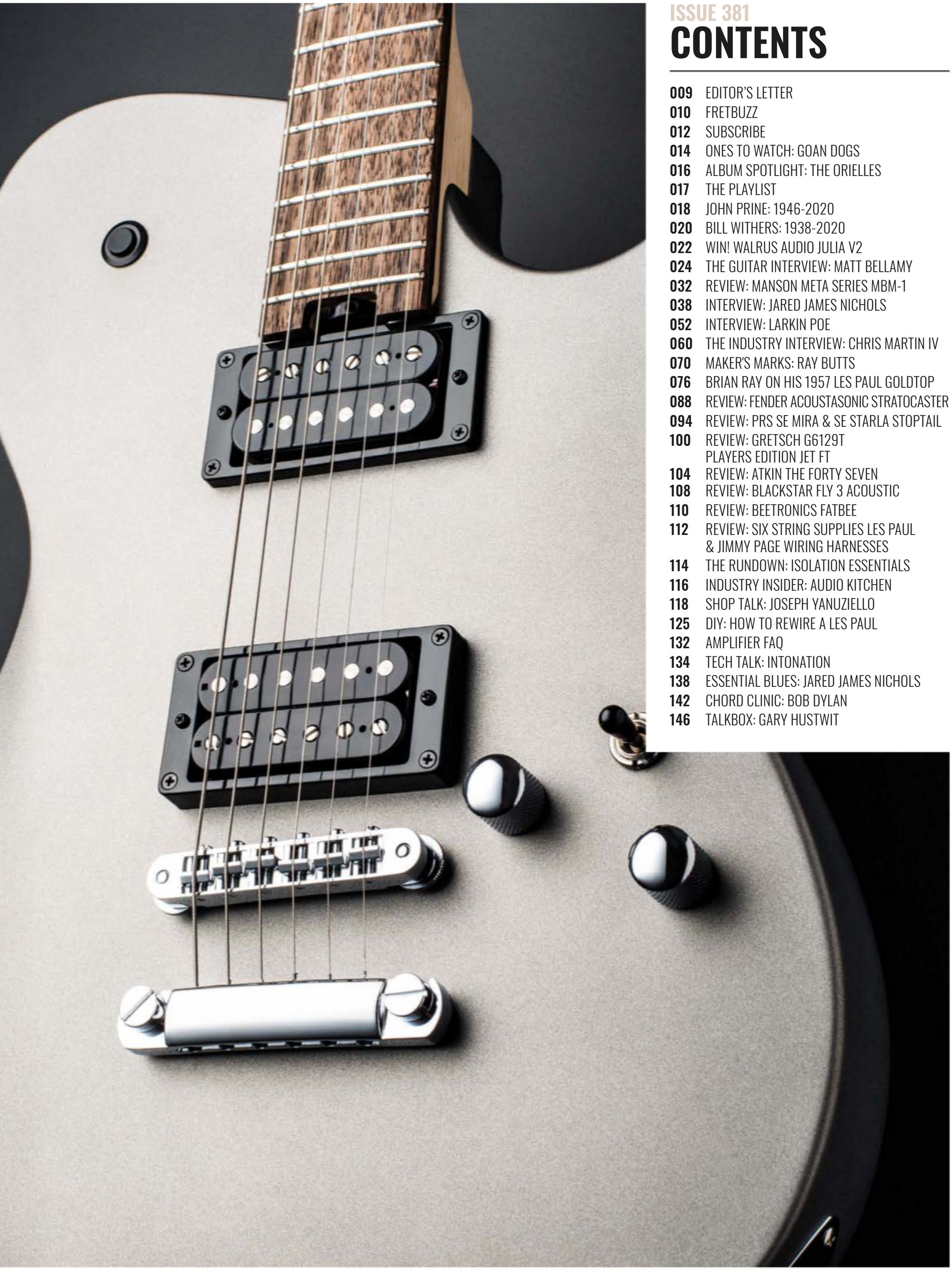

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EDITOR'S LETTER

REMOTE CONTROL

Although the world has changed beyond all recognition in recent months, this period of lockdown has perhaps provided many of us with an opportunity to finally get around to things we'd been putting off for a very long time. Personally, I've been ploughing through several Christmases worth of hitherto unread books and, of course, playing a lot of guitar.

As soon as everyone in the band was geared up for it – and the free trial of Logic has certainly helped, thanks Apple! – we started collaborating remotely on new material in a way that simply wouldn't have been possible just a few years ago. If this sounds like something you'd love to get into but you don't know where to start, check out our rundown of lockdown essentials for guitarists on p114. Whether you've got £29 or upwards of a grand to spend, there are solutions here that can help you get pro guitar tones at home without annoying the neighbours.

Elsewhere in this month's mag, we chat to two men at the helm of very different guitar companies: Muse star Matt Bellamy and Chris Martin IV. Bellamy's investment in Manson Guitar Works typifies the new breed of dynamic artist relationships with gear brands, while Chris Martin's tenure as the head of the family business has seen America's oldest guitar company evolve into an operation that looks like it has every chance of lasting for a further 187 years. What will the guitars of 2207 look like? And who will be playing them? By then, even Matt Bellamy's futuristic new signature model will look retro.

As if all that wasn't enough, you'll also hear from Larkin Poe, Brian Ray and Jared James Nichols, find out how to rewire a Les Paul, learn to play chords like Bob Dylan, and read about hot new gear from Fender, PRS, Gretsch, Blackstar and more. Enjoy the issue – I'll see you next month.

Chris Vinnicombe
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FRETBUZZ

Your letters and observations on the world of guitar

Join the conversation Email us at editors@guitar.com

RIDING OUT THE STORM

Dear Chris, your latest editor's letter asked for ideas to help us get through the coming months of lockdown. One thing I am going to be doing is all the guitar mods I've been saving up, starting with rewiring a Jazzmaster using ideas from the May 2019 issue. But once it's done, I'd like to get back to making music, so I'd like to suggest advice on setting up a modest digital recording system. Like a lot of people, I tried digital home recording some years ago but the software was complex, the sound quality was very 'digi' and I quickly lost interest in the time-consuming setup required.

So, with a modest three-year-old Windows laptop or an iPad Mini as a starting point, what do I need to buy (new or used) to get going? What are the best easy-to-use budget software applications? What is the best-value interface? Where can I get some good drum loops? Can I use my floorboard of effects without MIDI? Will the vocal mics from my band's PA do for vocals and acoustic guitar? How do I set up an ordinary living room so I get a decent recorded sound at low volume? How do I approach mastering once I have some tracks down? Related to this, where are the most appropriate places to try and publish music on the internet? How does it work? I'm a complete novice at this and I suspect many other readers will be too.

More generally, I really like the editorial's shift to long-form interviews, and your increasing focus on women guitar players to balance the presentation of talent. I'm looking forward to when the first full-time female contributor appears on the team. Keep up the great work, and particular thanks to Huw for advice he has sent me in response to a couple of articles.

KENN PALMER, VIA EMAIL

Hi Kenn, thanks so much for your kind words and for the helpful suggestions. As it happens, we've been thinking along similar lines, so keep an eye out for home recording advice in the mag and on Guitar.com in the near future!

TOMMY GUNNER

Dear *Guitar Magazine*, I was really happy to see your interview with Tommy Emmanuel and Jerry Douglas in last month's magazine. I already have tickets for when Tommy plays in Cardiff next year. I saw him last time around and was fortunate enough to meet and talk with him after the show. As well as being an amazing guitarist, he's also a really nice guy. I love his philosophical approach to music and guitar playing. He's also a great communicator. Thank you for the feature, and keep up the great work!

BOB LE NORMAND, VIA EMAIL

BRIDGE OF WHYS

Dear editor, why do most acoustic guitars have solid unadjustable bridges? I think it's a ploy to build up your frustration so much that you attempt to get your strings lower than the Niagara Falls tightrope walk via an array of amateur methods, such as shaving layers off and channelling deeper groves for your strings, resulting in (a) irreparable damage (b) a loss in the value of your instrument and (c) the wrath of your bank manager when your account goes further into the red due to the purchase of yet another guitar!

And Lord help those who try to fathom which way to turn the truss rod adjustment bolt using implements from the rusty toolbox at the back of their garage. Please note, acoustic guitar makers, most of us would like to tickle the strings when playing, and not have to press down six cheese wires at once!

GIULIANO CAROSI, CORSHAM, UK

Hi Giuliano, the bridges on acoustic guitars tend to be the way they are primarily for reasons of tone rather than economics, but some manufacturers have experimented with adjustable acoustic bridges over the years – not least Gibson in the 1960s. Also, certain brands tend to err on the side of caution when cutting nut slots at the factory – after all, it's easier to make the slots deeper if required than it is to install a whole new nut if the strings are too low. All that said, it sounds like you find most traditional acoustic guitars rather frustrating so we'd recommend checking out a Taylor – a brand whose guitars are famed for their easy playability – or even a hybrid design such as the Fender American Acoustasonic Stratocaster, reviewed on p88 of this issue.

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NEW BORN

MATT BELLAMY

ON MANSON GUITAR WORKS, HIS NEW SIGNATURE MODEL AND THE FUTURE OF MUSE

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ONES TO WATCH

GOAN DOGS

WORDS SAM ROBERTS

The Bristolian five-piece and DIY champions have returned from a two-year live hiatus with new singles and a stellar show that makes use of their self-built guitars and enormous pedalboards. But is this a case of old dogs, new tricks, or does this band still have some bite?

When your band is earning riotously good reviews from your local scene and seems poised for big things, surely the last thing you should do is down tools and go on a two-year hiatus? But that's what Goan Dogs did – and the results speak for themselves.

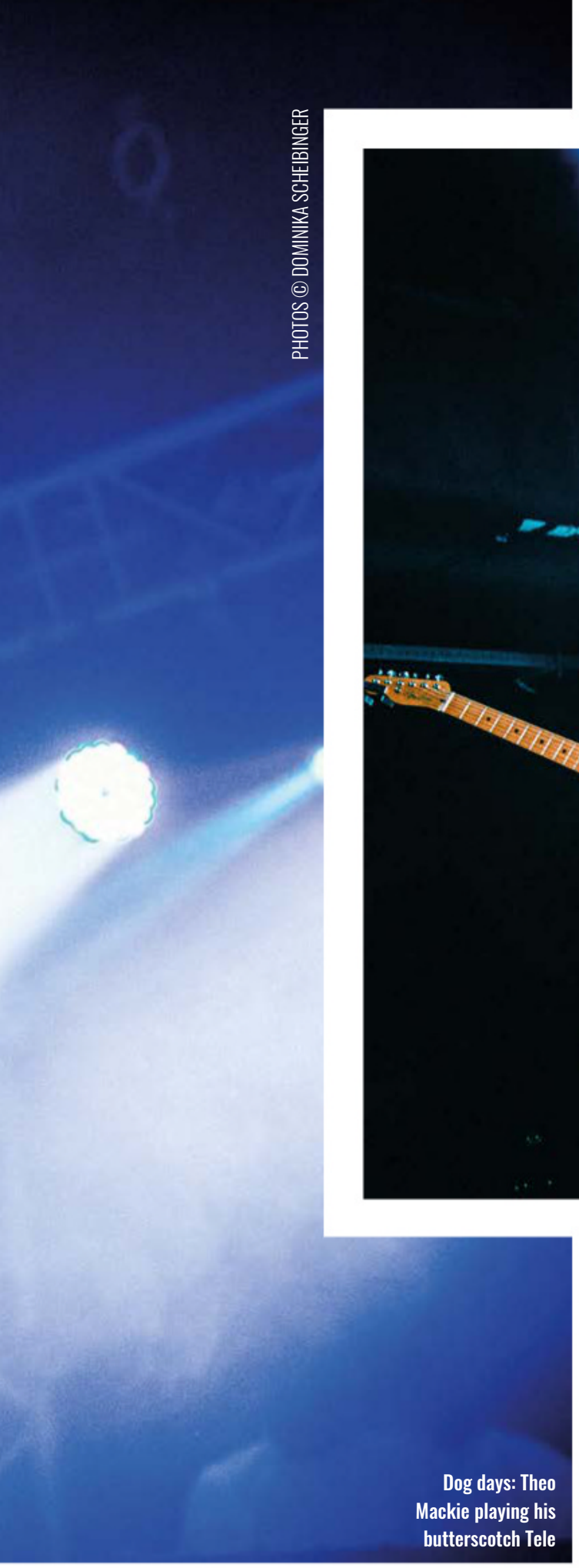
The Bristol-based five-piece has stormed back to the scene with bangers *Anxiety* and *God Loves A Trier*, both of which have seized the attention of BBC Radio 6 Music and ensured fervorous crowds at their recent comeback gigs. It's as if they've never been away at all.

The band are also fierce champions of DIY guitar culture, producing themselves, making their own videos and even building their own instruments. Guitar player Theo Mackie details how the Dogs' life began, from his love of Jimi Hendrix to crafting songs specifically with live performance in mind.

What first drew you to playing guitar?

"Probably my dad. He was constantly glued to his guitar and would spend evenings endlessly strumming away. He gave me his old acoustic when I was 11 and signed me up for lessons but it was hard. I hated it so I gave up. My dad took it upon himself to learn the songs I loved at the time, starting with Hendrix's *Hey Joe*, and teach them to me. That gave me the love straight away."

PHOTOS © DOMINIKA SCHEIBINGER



Dog days: Theo Mackie playing his butterscotch Tele

"WE'VE NEVER HAD A LABEL OR ANYTHING. BUT WE STUCK WITH IT BECAUSE WE LOVE THE FREEDOM OF BEING ABLE TO RELEASE MUSIC WHEN WE WANT, HOW WE WANT, IF WE WANT"

Tell us about your main guitar and pedal setups.
"I'm a lefty so I can't have nice things. However, I have been blessed with a lovely late-1980s butterscotch Telecaster that I love very much. Its tone is so warm and tasty. I run that through, like, 10 pedals and into a Fender Blues Deluxe. Recent additions to the pedalboard are the DOD Rubberneck delay and a Chase Bliss Mood, which allows me to create some delish delays and otherworldly pitched sounds. Sonically, I try to be the bridge between Sam [Kynan Powell, synths] and Luke [St Leger, vocals and guitar], and my setup largely allows for that."

You've been a band for more than eight years but hung up your instruments for a while. What made you return to the stage?
"I'm so proud of what we've made in our time off and am itching to get back on the stage to show it to people. A lot of what we've made required us to rethink how we play as a live band, and the process of working it out and playing those tunes well has been rewarding. For me, playing live is the point of being in a band. It's the reward for doing all of the experimentation and practice before. Playing live is the final step and we can't wait."

As a band that prides itself on self-releasing music, how important is engagement with your fanbase and the independent scene?
"Big-up to anyone doing things themselves in the music scene. It's not always easy but it has its benefits. We started self-releasing music because it was our only option – we've never had a label or anything. But we stuck with it because we love the freedom of being able to release music when we want, how we want, if we want. There's a real DIY spirit that runs through the band. Everything from music videos to merch is made by the band and always has been. Luke even makes his own guitars. We love seeing other bands shoot their own videos and produce their own albums."

You're getting coverage from respected radio stations such as BBC Radio 6 Music. Does that up the ante for you?
"The novelty of hearing your song on the radio never rubs off. As for upping the ante, probably not. We just want to make and play music and, ideally, we'd like lots of people to hear it and like it. For radio stations to be playing our songs just lets us know we're doing an alright job."

What's next for Goan Dogs?
"The album is the one. Luke's taking the helm on production and mixing, and it's giving us a level of creative control that we've never had before. It's comforting to know that it's going to sound exactly how we like and be a reflection of what we've been working towards – unless Luke fucks it up, that is." G

Goan Dogs' *God Loves A Trier* is out now

THE PLAYLIST

ALBUM SPOTLIGHT

THE ORIELLES
DISCO VOLADOR

INTERVIEW SAM ROBERTS

Finding influences in everything from bossa nova to ABBA, The Orielles' *Disco Volador* is loaded with guitar-driven pop symphonies and avant-garde lyricism. Guitarist Henry Carlyle-Wade tells us more

One of the country's most colourful guitar bands, The Orielles' second album sees them expanding their sonic palette with commendable levels of courage and intent. Despite the critical acclaim of their debut LP *Silver Dollar Moment*, guitarist Henry Carlyle-Wade received a few minor criticisms, which he's used to help develop his burgeoning chops. Drawing influence from bossa nova, and jazz greats such as Lenny Breau, he found renewed inspiration in seventh chords and pedal tones. Here, Carlyle-Wade dissects his favourite guitar parts on new album *Disco Volador*, taking in discontinued French rack delays and the genius of ABBA along the way.

RAPID I

"This is quite an interesting one because it starts off on F major seventh. I intended it to be F# minor with the A and the E as the shared pedal tones between the chords, just shifting a semitone on those chords, but when the keys player started practising it, I realised that what I'd written was just like what every post-punk band is playing at the moment. I'm really happy with the bridge part. I was listening to ABBA once and I realised that it's their bridges that make you want to dance and scream. I wanted to write a bridge that just rises and rises into a powerful chorus. I was also listening to loads of bossa nova music, so I got my nylon-string guitar and then put some bossa nova percussion over the top."

WHILST THE FLOWERS LOOK

"Bill Ryder-Jones left a 1970s Jazzmaster with us after a gig in Liverpool about two years ago and never asked for it back. I took it into the studio and used it on *Whilst The Flowers Look*, which I came up with the chord pattern for in August 2018, when I was trying to expand the chords I was playing beyond normal majors and minors. I was playing these two chords, which is an A major seventh with the F# on it – I have no idea what it's called – but then using that F# as a pedal tone to go to B major seventh. Using pedal tones creates this really nice feeling of familiarity but with new chords."

MEMOIRS OF MISO

"It all started again with major sevenths – they're kind of a fascination of mine at the moment. It's a happy chord but there's a lot of underlying sadness. Feeling emotional from listening to music has always been the driving force behind playing it. I was using a Fender Hot Rod Deluxe IV and switching between a Roland Jazz Chorus and a Baldwin. All of the guitar tracking I did was in stereo. I used a 1970s Mutron and a bit of trem on the amp but my pedalboard is constantly changing throughout every song. I also used a Publison delay. Fuck, you have no idea! It's stereo, so you can control the left and the right ear independently. You can get some mental sounds out of it."

A MATERIAL MISTAKE

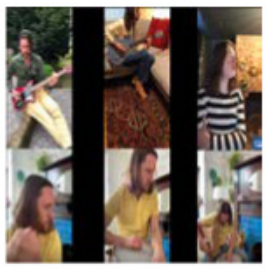
"What I love about that track is that I got a Line 6 Echo Park to emulate what the Publison was doing. After the first album, we set out to write this song and wanted to create a dub sound – heavy bass, minimal drums and echoing guitars. I detuned my Strat to play a rough G minor seventh chord on all the strings and then did a couple of takes of beating the strings with a rubber beater. It sounds different to playing with a plectrum and you can create crescendos with how hard you hit. All the strings resonate, even the ones you don't hit, and it made this wet and spacious harmony. On one of the takes I used a paintbrush."

SPACE SAMBA

"This track has a recurring pedal tone of A over the top of a lot of the chords, and that nicely ties moving from G major seventh to G minor seventh to A minor, and then back to G major seventh. Because I had loads of criticisms after the first album, I was trying to make the songs we were writing more diverse from a chordal point of view. I found that having these notes that relay between such jazzy chords is the thing I can use to make it sound more digestible. There's a million ways I could have played the chord pattern and some would have been more restrictive for listeners." G

***Disco Volador* is out now on Heavenly Recordings**

This month's essential listening for guitar lovers



BLOSSOMS
Paperback Writer

Proving that isolation doesn't have to limit creativity, this Beatles cover showcases the Stockport quintet's impeccably stacked harmonies and authentic vintage tones, despite being recorded remotely.

THE 1975
Jesus Christ 2005 God Bless America

With Phoebe Bridgers on guest vocals, this single was inspired by Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska* and finds The 1975 at their most haunting. Bridgers elevates the song with an exquisite contribution.

VULFPECK
3 On E ft Antwaun Stanley

The funk jam band announced their new album with this single, with vocals from Antwaun Stanley. Cory Wong's signature chops are present as ever, and Theo Katzman adds clever muted staccato melodies.

BOY AZOOGA
UFO

Following live slots with Liam Gallagher and Neil Young, Davey Newington's Boy Azooga have returned to the studio for a cover of Jim Sullivan's 1969 gem, replete with sleigh bells and spaghetti western-inspired guitars.

PEPIJN
Two Sides To Every Story

Written, recorded and performed by Dutch musician Pepijn 't Hart, his debut album switches between Nashville country, Beatle-esque ballads, and ballsy guitar. The title track boasts jangly chords and sweet melodies.

THE STROKES
Why Are Sundays So Depressing

Released 19 years after their seminal debut, *The New Abnormal* sees The Strokes leaning more on synths than guitars. But this track sounds akin to something from 2011 album *Angles*, with delay and psych influences.

LAURA MARLING
Held Down

Rather than pushing her record back due to COVID-19, Laura Marling instead chose to release *Songs For Our Daughter* early. With wonderful acoustic guitars and searing lead lines under the vocals, it's a welcome return.

ROLLING BLACKOUTS COASTAL FEVER
She's There

The Australian indie-rock band announced their new album *Sideways To New Italy* with this release. Listen out for jangly guitars and harmonised lead melodies, alongside carefully orchestrated vocal hooks.

BUZZARD BUZZARD BUZZARD
Hollywood Actors

The Cardiff glam-rockers recently signed to Communion Records and released this jam while shouting about their forthcoming 10-track EP. Powerchords run amok before a 1970s-inspired guitar solo takes charge.

SORRY
Snakes

After several EPs, Sorry finally released their debut album in March, showcasing a wide variety of influences. Here, eerie vocals and arpeggiated guitars twist and turn with tension throughout.

PHOEBE BRIDGERS
Kyoto

The second single from the LA singer-songwriter's sophomore LP takes flight in its uplifting choruses with horns played by Bright Eyes' Nathaniel Walcott. *Punisher* is scheduled for release 19 June.

BLAKE MILLS
Vanishing Twin

LA polymath Blake Mills' new album *Mutable Set* features an esteemed list of collaborative musicians, including Pino Palladino and Cass McCombs. Listen to this one on headphones and in the dark.

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John Prine

— 1946-2020 —

Legendary singer-songwriter John Prine has died at the age of 73. Prine's family broke the news to *Rolling Stone* that he passed away as a result of COVID-19 on 7 April 2020, at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville.

Prine, who over the course of a five-decade career became one of America's most beloved and respected songwriters, was first hospitalised with COVID-19 symptoms on 26 March. Two days later, he was reported to be in critical condition and required breathing assistance through a ventilator.

Prine's wife and manager Fiona Whelan Prine provided regular updates on her husband's condition via Twitter. On 31 March she reported that she herself had contracted COVID-19 – she also tested positive after returning from Europe – and that Prine's condition had stabilised. However, after 13 days in intensive care, the musician succumbed to complications related to the disease.

Prine's long and successful career earned him numerous high-profile achievements, including two Grammy wins for Best Contemporary Folk Album, the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, a place in the Songwriters Hall of Fame, and the PEN New England Song Lyrics of Literary Excellence Award, whose recipients include legends such as Leonard Cohen and Chuck Berry.

Prine's influence over modern Americana was powerful and far-reaching, with his prowess as a songwriter applauded by such giants of popular music as Bob Dylan, who considered Prine to be one of his all-time favourite songwriters.

"He writes beautiful songs," Dylan told *Far Out Magazine*. "I remember when Kris Kristofferson first brought him on the scene. All that stuff about Sam Stone, the soldier junky daddy and *Donald And Lydia*, where people make love from 10 miles away. Nobody but Prine could write like that."

Tributes to Prine poured in from across the music world, with Elvis Costello penning an emotional tribute essay about the Illinois native.

"The songs were filled with what sounded like advice from a friend in a crowded bar or a voice in the margins but never one that was self-pitying or self-regarding," he wrote. "Perhaps it was his resilience that makes accepting John's passing more difficult. He had repeatedly shown such strength and courage in overcoming the challenges of illness.

"He was so loved by Fiona and his family and all of his friends, admirers and listeners that it was easy to believe that he would be returned to us; to laugh as he read all of those many quotations from his lyrics that acquaintances, strangers and his longest-lived pals have been sharing in these last days. They tell us that a world with John Prine in it has been much better than the poorer one in which we now dwell."

Prine's final record was *The Tree Of Forgiveness*, which reached number five on the Billboard 200 upon its release in 2018. Before his hospitalisation, he toured relentlessly around the world in support of the album, performing some of the largest shows of his career, including sold-out nights at New York's Radio City Music Hall and the Olympia Theatre in Dublin, Ireland. Prine is survived by his wife, and three children.

Bill Withers

— 1938-2020 —

Iconic songwriter and musician Bill Withers has died at the age of 81 due to heart complications. Withers passed away on 30 March 2020 in Los Angeles, and the news of his death was released by his family three days later in an emotional and heartfelt statement.

"We are devastated by the loss of our beloved, devoted husband and father," the statement read. "A solitary man with a heart driven to connect to the world at large, with his poetry and music, he spoke honestly to people and connected them to each other. As private a life as he lived close to intimate family and friends, his music forever belongs to the world. In this difficult time, we pray his music offers comfort and entertainment as fans hold tight to loved ones."

Withers penned several timeless classics over the course of his career, including *Lean On Me*, *Ain't No Sunshine*, *Lovely Day*, *Use Me* and *Just the Two Of Us*. He won a total of three Grammy awards and was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2015.

Withers was born William Harrison Withers Jr in 1938, in Slab Fork, West Virginia. His father died when he was 13, after which he was raised with the help of his grandmother. Withers joined the US Navy at 17 and would spend the next nine years in the service, eventually moving to Los Angeles in 1967 to embark on a music career.

It was slow going for Withers, who worked various manual jobs while gigging and recording to little avail. It wasn't until the age of 32 that he finally hit the big time with his debut album *As I Am*.

The record featured the iconic *Ain't No Sunshine*, which won Withers his first Grammy, for Best R&B Song. Withers went on to produce albums at an impressive rate throughout the 1970s, releasing three in as many years up until 1978's *'Bout Love*.

After this, he claimed, Columbia's head of A&R Mickey Eichner forced him to take a break from the studio, and aside from an appearance on Grover Washington Jr's 1981 hit *Just The Two Of Us*, his next album would be 1985's *Watching You Watching Me*.

It would also be Withers' last studio record, as he retired from the music industry after its release, criticising the executives that he claimed were trying to influence the way his music sounded.

While Withers would never release another album, his songs remained part of the firmament of popular music in the decades that followed; many of them have been covered on numerous occasions.

Tributes poured in from around the music world upon the news of Withers' passing. Beach Boys icon Brian Wilson wrote that "Bill was a songwriter's songwriter and wrote so many great songs", while Nile Rodgers simply described Withers as, "Class, class and more class".

"Rest in power Bill Withers," wrote Lenny Kravitz in a heartfelt tribute on Instagram. "Your voice, songs, and total expression gave us love, hope, and strength. My soul always has and always will be full of your music. Your humility displayed and depth of your power as you carried us all to a better place. You're still and always will be Bill."

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Walrus Audio's sensationally versatile maritime-themed Julia has been making waves with chorus devotees since its release in 2016. For 2020, the US boutique brand has released a refined update, ready to whet appetites all over again.

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We were impressed with the Julia V2 when we reviewed the pedal in issue 380, bestowing on it our coveted Editor's Choice award, calling it, "a great take on a classic effect," and stating that, "even if you think you don't like chorus, you may be pleasantly surprised." Read the full review at *Guitar.com*.

To enter this exciting competition, simply visit the link below and answer the following question. Good luck.

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Enter at: guitar.com/competitions

The closing date for this competition is 23:59 BST, 5 June 2020.

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THE *Guitar* INTERVIEW

MATT BELLAMY

The Muse frontman discusses Manson Guitar Works, Billie Eilish and the art of creating colossal distortion tones

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE
PORTRAITS JOLYON HOLROYD
LIVE PHOTOGRAPHY ELEANOR JANE

Bumping into guitar gods at NAMM is nothing new but there was a time when the show was probably regarded as too 'muso' for alternative-rock stars to frequent. In recent years though, things have changed. The rise and rise of Instagram has created a petri dish in which the relationships between hip young artists and gear companies have flourished into full-blown collaborations, while at the high-dollar end of the spectrum, stadium-filling guitarists such as Ed Sheeran and Matt Bellamy have invested in long-established guitar companies. In simple terms, the shredders and metalheads are no longer the biggest kids in the playground.

Back in January, before the world closed its doors, we were ushered into a tiny room barely insulated from the maelstrom of the NAMM show floor for an audience with the aforementioned Muse frontman. After tearing up stages and charts across the globe for more than 20 years, 2019 saw Bellamy smash his piggy bank and purchase a majority shareholding in Devon's Manson Guitar Works. It made perfect sense – the interstellar tones of tricked-out Manson custom electrics have driven Muse's biggest hits and helped give Bellamy a guitar identity all of his own.

With founder Hugh Manson set to move into a consultancy role to allow for semi-retirement, Bellamy and CEO Adrian Ashton are geared up to pen a new chapter for the Manson brand. Their first step was to announce the affordable Meta Series MBM-1 model (reviewed on p32) and it's the fanfare surrounding its release that brings Bellamy to the social event of the season for guitar companies.

"It's nice to be able to launch in a low-price range," says Matt, as we admire one of the prototypes. "It's our design but we're getting the manufacturing done by Cort to bring prices down and help distribution. Manson is obviously associated with high-end, hand-made guitars so it was a bit of a step, I think, for us to take the plunge into the lower price range. But we're approving everything before it goes out. It really is the best guitar we can make for this price. Every time I go on social media, there's people saying, 'Make a bloody Manson for less than a grand', so it's nice to be able to do that."

As with any signature instrument, people may be sceptical about how close the production version is to the guitars Bellamy uses on stage but he describes it as "pretty much identical" in sound and feel.

"I WANTED TO COME UP WITH A GUITAR THAT WOULD LEAD ME DOWN A PATH OF 21ST CENTURY MUSIC RATHER THAN GOING BACKWARDS"

"People think I trash a lot of guitars on tour but it's just not true – I've probably *thrown* the most guitars but you pick them up and they still work. The Manson guitars were designed to deal with that kind of treatment so they are really hard-wearing."

Kaoss reigns: Bellamy performing live with his custom Manson Red Carbon model at Download in 2015

HYPER MUSIC

Roadworthiness aside, although the debut model in the Meta Series features no onboard gadgets other than a kill button for stutter effects, Bellamy says that this may change as the line progresses. "We're starting out with a pretty simple one. As time goes by, though, we might start introducing some other built-in effects and so on, different pickup variations, different colours. We're constantly experimenting and doing new things.

"For a while, with Manson, we've been doing the guitars that have Kaoss Pads built in – I really like the idea of being able to bring one out that has built-in stuff, so straight out of the box you can do cool tricks with the XY controller. One of the things we're doing while we're here is chatting about doing a collaborative guitar that has the Whammy components in it, so all that pitch-shifting and crazy stuff you can just do right there without any outboard effects."

When this kind of onboard tech becomes accessible to the masses, we wonder if Bellamy will have to find a whole new playbook in order to stay one step ahead of copyists. "If anybody ever copies anything you do, I think that's a compliment," he says, with a grin. "It's a sign that you've done something new or different. We were probably the first to have the XY controller onboard, and I've seen a few others floating around now. Fender called me in for a meeting once and showed me something they were working on and I was like, 'Nah, I'm with Manson, leave me alone!'"

Although the boutique-effects boom has seen more players approach the guitar like a controller than ever before, Bellamy still feels that the geometry and ergonomics of an instrument have a significant impact on the compositions it inspires. "With effects, you can go in any direction you want to these days," he says. "But, fundamentally, the way a guitar feels is so important. When I was younger and I picked up a Strat or a Gibson or something like that, it would always send me down a particular way of playing, which I felt was less original than when playing guitars of my own design.

"The ultimate test is: is it something I would use on stage?" he says. "And the answer is yes. I'm going to have a bunch of these on tour next time I go out. Without sounding too destructive, I throw my guitars around all the time, so having ones in this price range makes it slightly less scary. Having said that, people see me lob my guitars around on stage a lot – we send the parts back for repair and most of the time, the worst-case scenario is a new neck. I'll do maybe seven or eight shows where I lob them around and they land on an amp or on stage and they just don't break at all. They are really, really strong.

"When I pick up this guitar, it makes me play the way I play, and come up with the ideas I come up with that are different to when I play any other type of guitar. That's all to do with feel. It directs the way you play. I wanted a guitar that would lead me down a path of 21st-century music rather than backwards with a retro feel. That's always been the challenge with the guitar in the modern era."

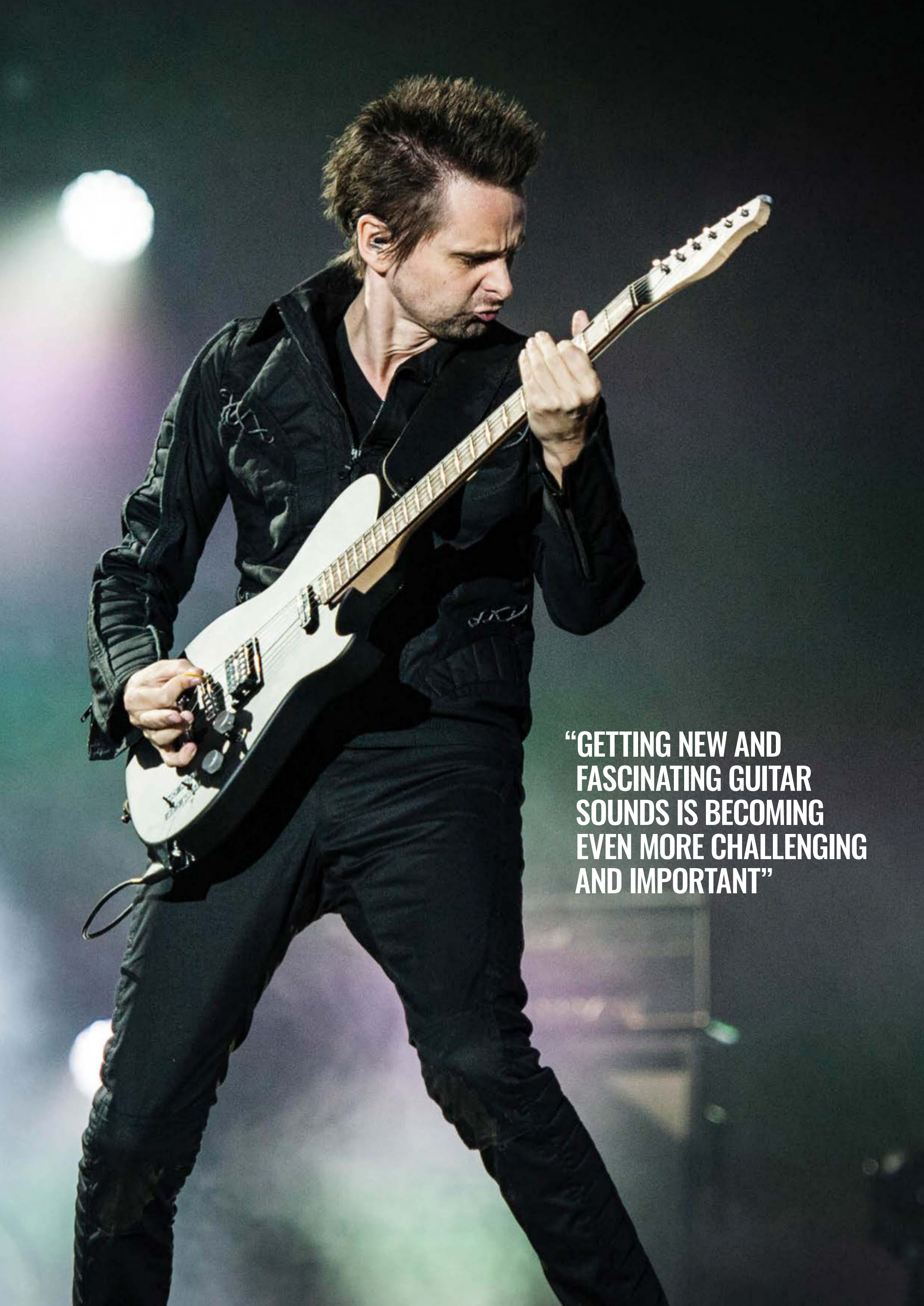
That said, Bellamy admits he's been discussing a "retro-style or retro-sounding Manson," possibly with Telecaster stylings. His signature Mansons have always seemed like a highly evolved and more aggressive take on Fender's iconic single-cut, so perhaps the concept isn't all that difficult to imagine.

"When I first came in 20 years ago, I was torn between an SG and the Telecaster-type shape, feel, sound and everything," Bellamy recalls. "I really wanted something that was in the middle of those two in terms of body shape, feel and sound."

We imagine that the way the guitar sounded in the context of a power trio was also a key consideration in those early days. "Yeah, you want something on the chunky side," he says. "Those Fender-type sounds can be too thin to properly fill the space in a three-piece band. Having said that, I don't play powerchords all that much – I try to play lead parts or single-note parts a lot, so you need a sound that's thick in tone and broad, and not plinky and thin."

PLUG-IN BABIES

When it comes to amp tones, the Muse star also takes a hybrid approach, using Kemper profiles that he created in the studio while out on tour. "There are models based on vintage Vox AC30s from 1964, plus a Marshall JTM45 sound, and a Diezel," says Bellamy. "A lot of the sounds I use actually blend those three together. Even on stage, I tend to use two Kempers side by side in stereo. If I've got a Marshall tone, then



"GETTING NEW AND FASCINATING GUITAR SOUNDS IS BECOMING EVEN MORE CHALLENGING AND IMPORTANT"

“I REALLY LIKE BILLIE EILISH – THAT DARK ATMOSPHERE SHE CREATES IS SOMETHING I CAN REALLY CONNECT WITH”

there will be a Vox that goes alongside it. Even though the real amps sound better, the user-friendly nature of Kemper makes it extremely flexible on stage, especially if you’re dealing with multiple changes within songs, for example.”

As well as that trio of amp tones, Bellamy typically uses six or seven other unique models, including direct fuzz tones. “I use a lot of DI’d fuzz sounds on stage – throughout any one show I’m probably working through up to 10 different amp sounds,” he explains.

“My theory is that the frequency range that the distorted guitar hits starts to lose its impact after about five to 10 minutes. If you don’t change the phase or attack of it, that powerful effect that you want the guitar to have when you first strum a chord? Cut to 10 minutes later and it’s just white noise.

“Throughout the set I tend to evolve the modelled amp sounds to be completely different. Song six in the setlist will have a completely different tone to the first song. The idea is it still has the same impact as the set develops. I’ve always been more on the amp-crunch side than pedals. I’ve never been a big user of crunch pedals going into amps. Whenever I use pedals, I tend to like them as a DI sound, like the crazy fuzzes. That is why I’ve gone down the Kemper route, to have so many different types of modelled amp sounds. Some people would use a cleaner amp tone and lots of different pedals to get different tones but I tend to use different amps.”

Despite all the digital modelling tech and DI fuzz that Bellamy employs, part of the magic of his gargantuan live sound still relies on hot glass bottles

and moving air. "I also have a Diezel running as well," he says. "So my onstage cabinet is blasting out Diezel sounds. It has four channels, which is handy. I have the first channel as a dead clean sound, so whenever I'm using a DI fuzz into the PA system, I'll have that same fuzz going into channel one of the Diezel on stage. Channel two I get to sound like a Vox, channel three sounds more like a Marshall, and channel four is more like a high-gain metal sound. And I have that blasting out of the speakers behind me.

"That plays into the sound a lot because my vocal mic is quite loud and it picks up a lot of that bleed. That's important. For TV performances, they always want you to have your amps either off or down. But I've noticed that, for a rock band, if you do that you end up with loads of cymbal noise coming down your microphone and it sounds terrible. I've learnt that you need a loud 4x12 on stage behind you, otherwise the blend with the microphone sound and the cymbals doesn't match up right."

NEW BORN

Although Bellamy is currently taking time out between album cycles to build a recording studio in Santa Monica – and he admits that, aside from hundreds of days of sunshine a year, the proximity to some of his favourite restaurants is a big part of the location's appeal – we wonder if any new musical influences are seeping in, and whether they will affect the direction of Muse's ninth studio LP when the band begins working on it in 2021.

"I know she's the biggest artist in the world right now, but I like Billie Eilish," he says. "I'm going to see her in concert tomorrow – it's one of those radio shows where everyone plays about 30 minutes. The Black Keys and Coldplay are playing too. But I really like Billie Eilish – that dark atmosphere she creates is something I can really connect with."

For much of 2020, Bellamy is likely to be busy with Manson Guitar Works, with new artists and product development on the radar. "We like the idea of finding up-and-coming guitarists we can design signature models for, catching people when they are still at that stage where they're looking to find their sound," he says.

"We've started talking about expanding the company range and we've talked about doing that retro-style guitar. It might be my take on a Tele or Strat-type vintage sound. Something like that would be good. Outside of guitars, we're talking about maybe pedals, maybe amps, maybe even microphones."

Given that contorting his guitar signal and voice has provided Bellamy with such a wellspring of creativity over the years, moving into that world should feel natural for the guitar company he now helms. It's also a subject that gives us a good excuse to ask the ultimate chicken-or-egg question: when he's coming up with guitar parts, is the guitar sound the jumping-off point for the riff or does he write the riff first and then search for an intriguing sound?

"It can be a bit of both," he admits. "I'm not as full-on as someone like The Edge, who's known for making interesting sounds and then writing with them. But that's something I might want to get into in the future because, as time goes on, I feel like getting new and fascinating guitar sounds is becoming even more challenging and important.

"On the next album, I might take that approach. I might find engaging sounds and write riffs or ideas with them. That's something I'm going to explore."

To find out more about the Manson Meta Series MBM-1, visit mansonguitarworks.com

18+

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MANSON
META SERIES MBM-1

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

Muse frontman Matt Bellamy is now at the helm of Manson Guitar Works, and 2020 sees the arrival of his new and affordable plug-in baby

Remember Victor Kiam, the businessman who liked Remington shavers so much he bought the company? That's almost what Matt Bellamy did with Manson Guitar Works last year, acquiring a majority share in the Devon firm that's been building the guitars he's used for the past two decades.

Don't worry, there are no signs that the Muse singer will start making cheesy TV ads or launch a range of Manson-branded electronic grooming products any time soon. Instead, the company's latest release is an updated version of Bellamy's signature model, with a few significant changes, including the name on the headstock.

What's in a name: Bellamy's signature sits atop the MBM-1

Face value: this latest affordable Bellamy model is Manson-branded

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £569
DESCRIPTION 6-string solidbody single-cutaway electric guitar, made in Indonesia
BUILD Basswood body, bolt-on maple neck, 12-16" compound radius Indian laurel fingerboard with 22 medium-jumbo frets, and synthetic nut
HARDWARE Staggered locking tuners, tune-o-matic bridge and stoptail
ELECTRONICS 2x Manson humbuckers, master volume and tone, 3-way pickup-selector switch, kill button
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 42.0mm at nut, 51.5mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20.7mm at first fret, 23.2mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 36mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.6kg/7.9lb
LEFT-HANDERS No
FINISH Starlight Silver (as reviewed), Satin Black
CONTACT mansonguitarworks.com, cortguitars.com

Manson's UK-built MB-1 Standard model hasn't been in full production for some time now – and cost upwards of £3,000 when it was – but in 2015 the company collaborated with Cort to launch the MBC-1, an Indonesian-made variant at a more accessible price. The MBM-1 is 2020's answer to that guitar.

It's still made under licence by Cort in Indonesia, and some specifications remain unchanged – it has a basswood body, maple neck, tune-o-matic bridge and kill button, for example – but the neck profile is now more of a V than a D, and the pickup nearest to it is a humbucker rather than a single coil. And yes, it now has 'Manson' on the front of the headstock and 'Cort' tucked away around the back, rather than the other way around. It's a subtle change but branding is everything these days.

The most important name on that headstock, however, remains the squiggly signature at the end. Unlike some of Bellamy's own guitars, there are no Kaoss Pad controllers, built-in effects or front-firing lasers here. But the MBM-1 is still clearly a 'Mattocaster', thanks largely to its distinctive 'melted Telecaster' outline.

There are a host of options with the MBM-1. This fetching silver-grey finish is new but the familiar black is available too. Should you want access to more unconventional sounds, you can have the neck pickup replaced by a Sustainiac for an extra £369. Note, too, that there's no gigbag included in the base price of £569.

Stealth mode: the MBM-1 has a master volume and a tone control, plus a secret weapon

Mark out: Manson boss Bellamy likes his fretboards unmarked but side dots offer a handy visual reference

Smooth operator: the maple neck and Indian laurel 'board are bliss to play

This is a modern rock guitar that cherry-picks design elements from both sides of the fence: the scale length is a Fender-style 25.5 inches and the neck is bolted on (via a plate inscribed "Cort x Manson"), but the bridge and tailpiece are true to the Gibson formula, as are the twin humbuckers, which give DC resistance readings of about 13k ohms and are therefore likely to be pretty pushy. You get Strat-style chamfers front and back and, at the other end, locking tuners with staggered post heights, negating the need for a string tree.

Finally, before we start making a supermassive racket, a word on the kill button. As every student of rock mayhem knows, you can create dramatic stutter effects on any two-pickup guitar with independent volume controls by turning

Origin of symmetry: the neck plate acknowledges the close collaboration between the brands

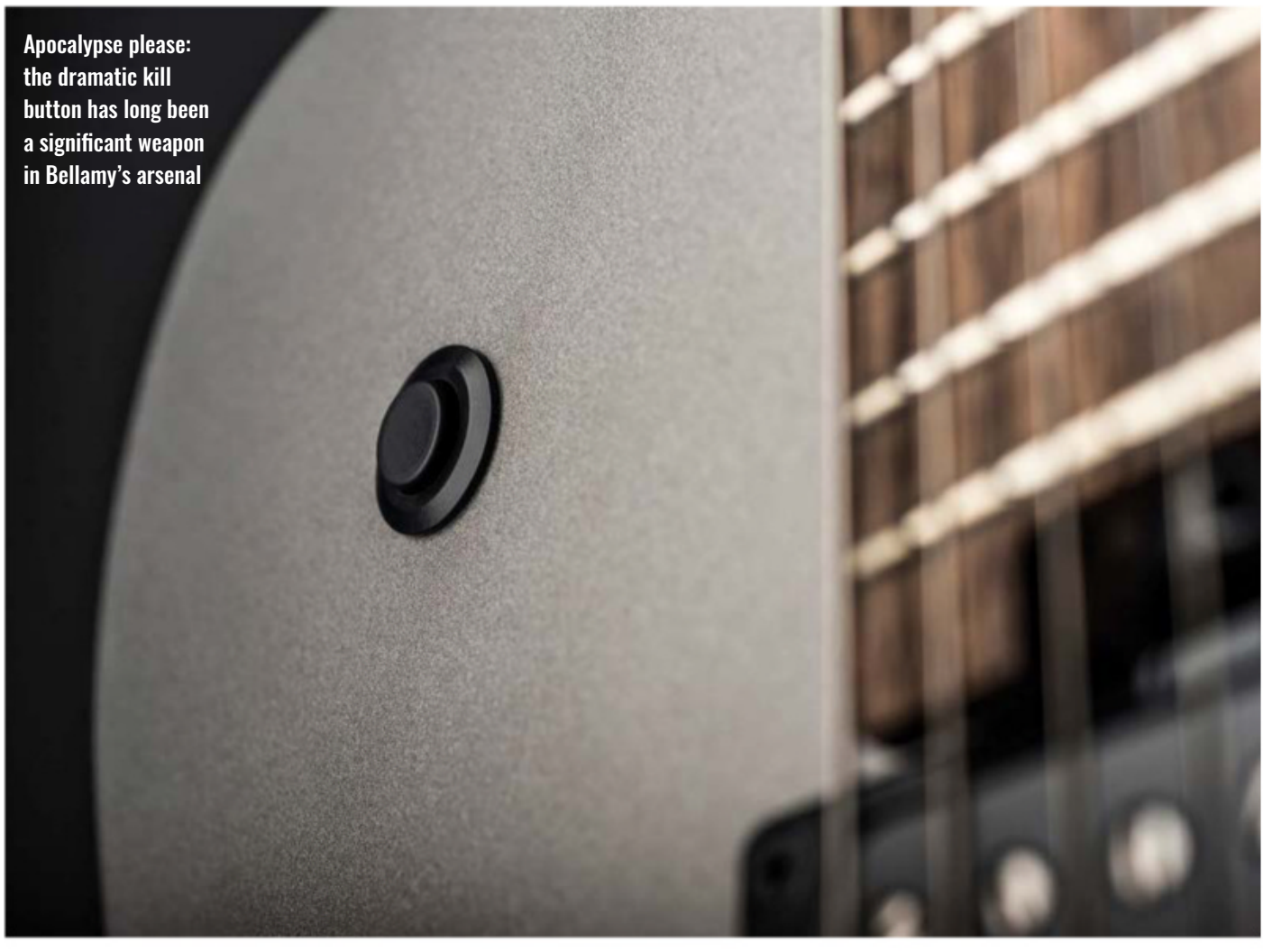
Feeling good: the MBM-1 boasts a basswood body and a tune-o-matic bridge

one of them to zero and rapidly toggling the switch. But as anyone who can count to two knows, the MBM-1 only has a master volume and a tone control – hence this little black button, helpfully positioned where the pickup switch on a Les Paul would be. Even if this isn't an essential tool for you, at least it's discreet.

IN USE

Although arena-sized riffs have taken a back seat in Muse's music in recent years, Bellamy remains an alt-rock hero to millions – and one whose finest six-string moments have involved more than a little distortion. With that in mind, we'll be cranking it up and playing with a heavy hand.

Speaking of which, at 3.6kg, our review guitar is weighty for a bolt-on, and much of that seems to be down to the Canadian hard maple neck rather than the basswood body. The neck's gentle V shape prevents it from feeling too chunky, but there's a decent amount of meat to it and the satin finish is smooth and inviting.



Apocalypse please: the dramatic kill button has long been a significant weapon in Bellamy's arsenal

Pickup lines: the uncovered Manson humbuckers deliver supermassive tones

Different tune: Cort-branded locking tuners keep things nicely stable

We're spoilt by the build quality of Asian-made guitars these days but it's still worth pointing out that this instrument is a joy to play, with an issue-free factory set-up. The only problem that our fingers encounter is the absence of any markers on the compound-radius Indian laurel fretboard. Bellamy prefers his 'boards unmarked so we'll have to get by with the white dots along the edge.

For what it's worth, the clean tones are big, clear and piano-like, especially on the neck pickup, with a well-balanced output level across all three positions. There's nothing spectacular going on here but it's the kind of solid foundation that bodes well for what's to come when we switch to the dirty channel.

The overdriven sounds are every bit as powerful and propulsive as we'd hoped. The low end thumps through with real authority on both pickups but it's the hot and punchy midrange that's doing all the heavy lifting here; it has such a tight focus that the guitar practically plays pinched harmonics by itself. There's just enough clarity for the pick attack on single notes to cut through with crisp precision and, as a bonus, those humbuckers are so potent that you won't need an awful lot of gain to coax a small amp into feedback.

To avoid any nasty popping, you'll want to turn up the gain before using the kill button. While we can't vouch for the longevity of this born-to-be-hammered component, it does manage to make it through our spitefully insistent testing without any difficulty.

Job done, then – and in commanding style. You're not getting the tonal complexity of a vintage Fender or Gibson type here but that's not the point. This is simply a super-playable guitar with a meaty yet disciplined 21st-century rock voice that could cajole a crowd into hysteria – and we've a feeling that's exactly what the boss asked for.

9/10 **A mean and masterful rock guitar that thrives on a high-gain diet, at a price most Muse fans should be able to afford. Mission accomplished**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Fender Jim Root Jazzmaster V4 **£1,139**, Reverend Billy Corgan Signature **£1,099**, Squier J5 Telecaster **£479**

GLORY ROAD

Jared James Nichols always seems to be having a good time – and you might be too if you were touring the world with your own power trio and being praised as a rising star of blues-rock. We spoke to the Wisconsin native about fingers, thumbs, his love of Les Pauls and why he only needs one pedal

WORDS MICHAEL WATTS PHOTOGRAPHY ELEANOR JANE

Gibson's London HQ is the perfect location at which to catch up with visiting dignitaries and it's here we meet Jared James Nichols during his European tour. Known as much for his fingers-only style of lead playing as for his maverick approach to vintage-guitar modification, Nichols is now a Les Paul player. But it wasn't always this way.

"I'll tell you what," he says, "in the early days, it was all about Stevie Ray Vaughan and Stratocasters. I grew up right next to the Alpine Valley Music Amphitheatre, which is where Stevie played his last show. When I was a kid, we could go out into our yard and listen to the concerts. When I started to play, a friend's dad turned me on to SRV and that was it.

"I was such a little Stevie Ray Vaughnabee. I saved up for a Tube Screamer and even played heavy strings – and this was when I'd just started. I realised soon enough, though, that there had already been a Stevie Ray. By the time I was 17, people would listen to me and say, 'You sound just like Stevie,' but I was already thinking, 'But how am I going to sound like me?'"

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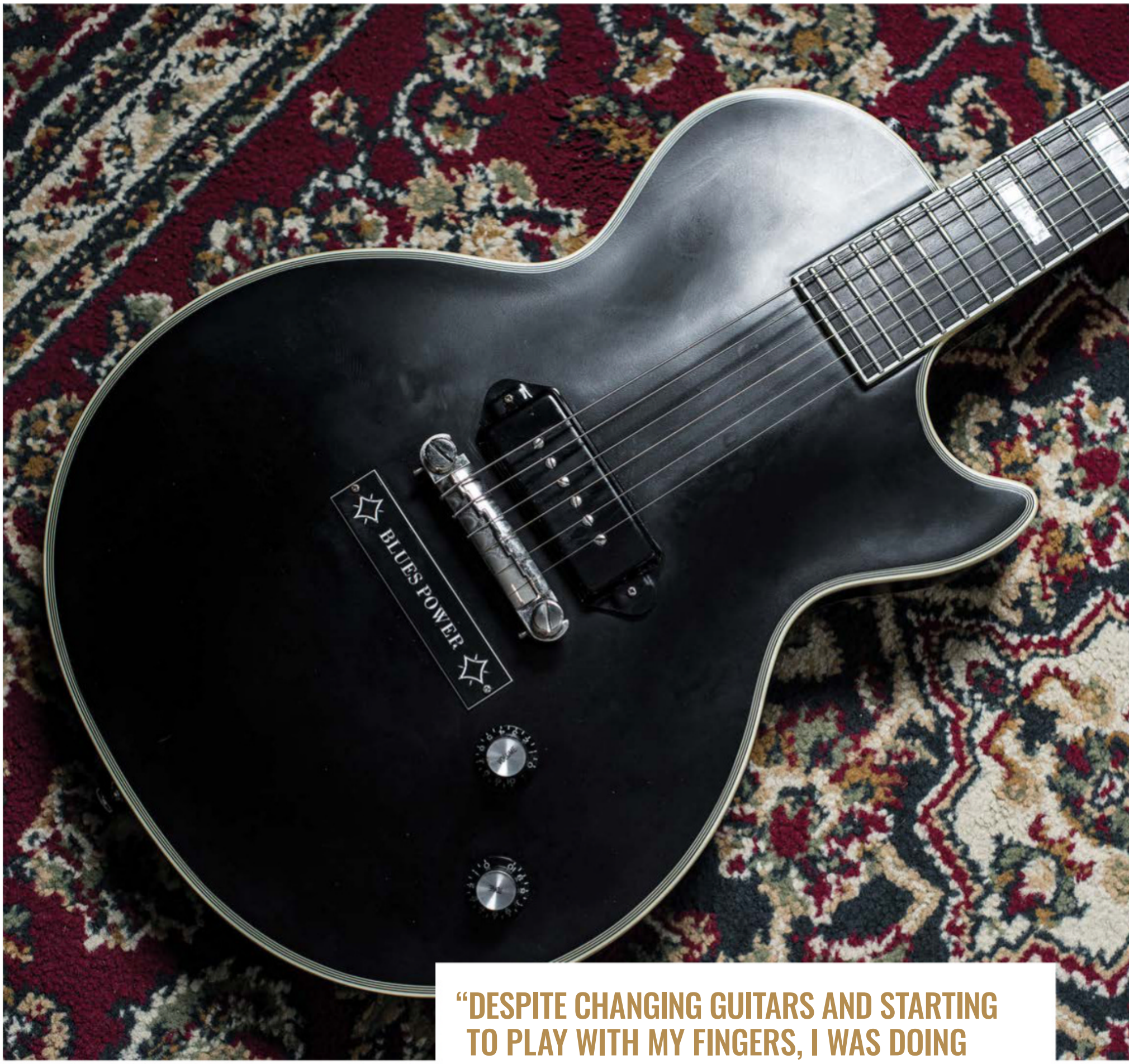


"DESPITE CHANGING GUITARS AND STARTING TO PLAY WITH MY FINGERS, I WAS DOING MANY OF THE SAME THINGS I DID ON A STRAT BUT ALTERING THEM TO SUIT THE LES PAUL"

This is a moment that many guitar players come to during the course of their musical development. Thankfully for Jared, he had some expert advice to point him in the right direction.

"I hit a crossroad, man," he says. "I think it comes from being aware of your influences but also listening to your heart and finding your own path. I remember Zakk Wylde telling me, 'We're all eating off the same deli tray, it's just the way you make your sandwich,' and it's true. You start by thinking, 'I love this about Albert King, I love this about Jimi,' and somehow you form the foundations to help you find yourself."

FINGERS & THUMBS

Two essential steps on Jared's long journey towards self-actualisation were the discovery of the Gibson Les Paul and a return to playing with fingers, both of which proved vital in forging a personal and instantly recognisable sound.

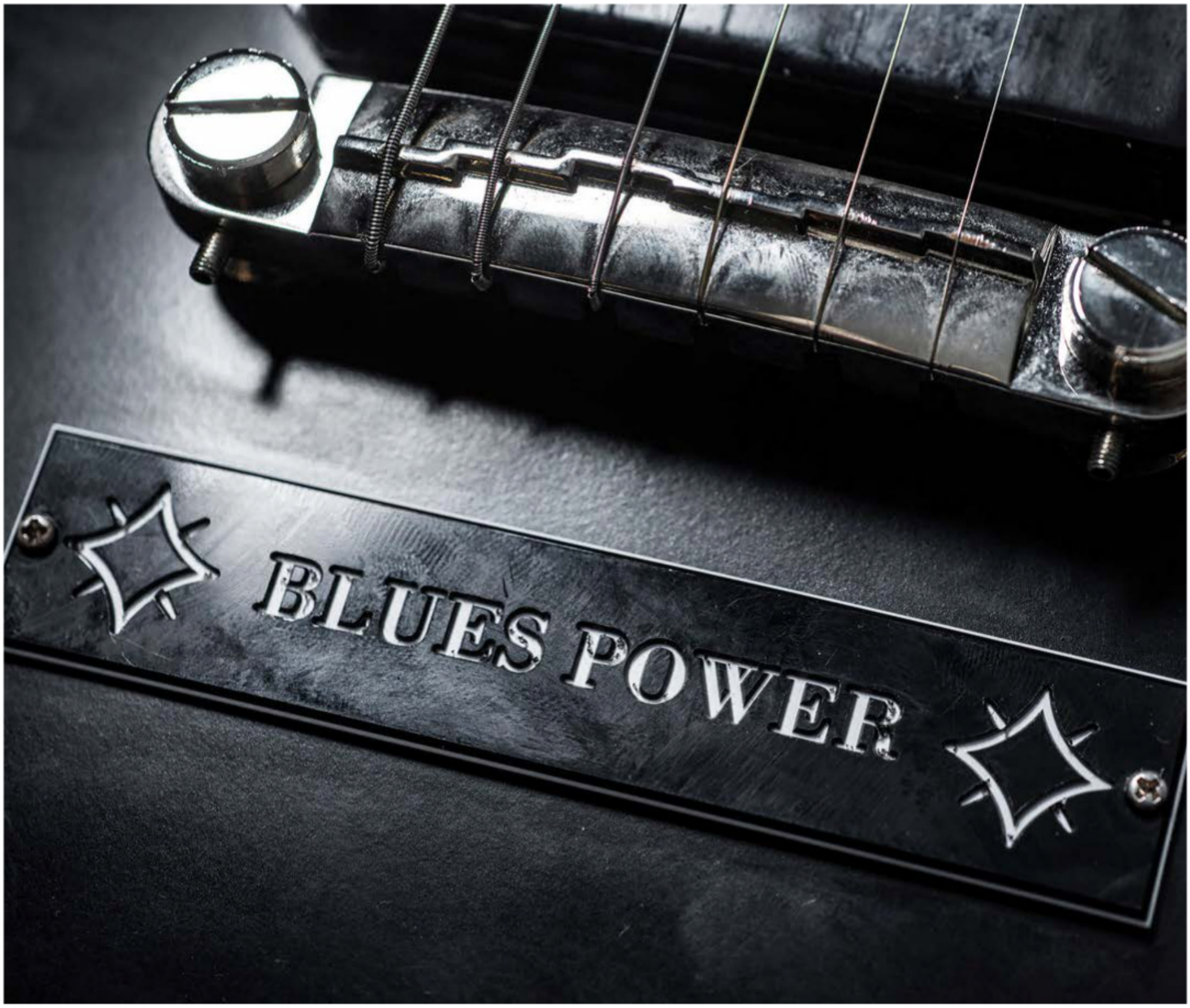
"I'm left-handed and, when I first started, I was holding a right-handed guitar upside down and my teacher made me flip it over. I was also playing with my thumb and he said to me, 'If you're going to be a real guitar player, then you have to use a pick.' I didn't know any better but it never felt right to me. I'd squeeze too tight and my hand would hurt, and the pick would slip around. Then I heard players like Jeff Beck and Mark Knopfler and I just put the pick down and left it there."

Both Beck and Knopfler are generally regarded as Strat aficionados, but it was in the more solid shape of the Les Paul that Jared finally found his muse.

"Back in the day, you could get a credit card from Guitar Center," he says. "I got a used Les Paul Studio.

ABOVE The Epiphone Jared James Nichols 'Old Glory' Les Paul Custom is modelled on his heavily modified Gibson

FACING PAGE Jared posing in front of a tower of his signature Blackstar cabs



At first, it didn't work for me but within a few weeks I started falling in love with the feel and sound of this Gibson. I remember thinking to myself, 'Is this okay?'

"I realised that, despite changing guitars and despite starting to play with my fingers, I was doing many of the same things I did on a Strat but altering them to suit the Les Paul, and it just sounded better."

GLORY DAYS

These days, it's tough to imagine the hirsute Jared James Nichols as anything other than a rocker toting a Les Paul – and there's one Les Paul in particular that has become inextricably linked to the bluesman: a 1970s Black Beauty known as Old Glory, which has spent a lot of time on the workbench.

"Old Glory started life as a Les Paul Custom, which was thrashed," says Jared. "It's probably a '71 or '72 model. I was hanging out with the guys from Aerosmith and Joe Perry was just getting into this single-pickup Les Paul idea. I was also influenced by Leslie West and Mountain, and that's when the whole thing turned to P-90s.

"Being a Strat guy originally, my ear got twisted and I thought, 'Okay, this has the growl and fatness of the humbucker but the clarity and delicacy of a true single-coil.' I started to get obsessed with that idea.

"Old Glory started off with humbuckers but I thought it would be the perfect guitar for some modifications. By the time I was done, it was a Les Paul Custom outfitted like a Les Paul Junior, with a wraparound bridge and everything. I routed out space for the dog-ear P-90 with a hammer and a screwdriver, then wired up the volume and tone knobs. It sounded great. People always ask me,

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'How do you keep P-90s quiet?' You don't, I just try and be fast on the volume knob."

Before very long, Old Glory had become Jared's calling card, and the distinctive instrument had caught the eyes of those higher up in the industry. "I was out touring and people started to notice and ask, 'What's up with that guitar?'" he says. "Then Gibson started to take notice. One day, I visited and they said, 'Old Glory needs to be your signature model and we want to make it.'

"Although the original was a Gibson, the signature model first came out as an Epiphone, which was great. I'm still quite new in the guitar world, so it's crazy to me to have a signature model in the first place. I tour with the Epiphone guitar. I love it and I'm proud of it. It sold really well too – you know, people could actually afford it. I've been on the road with it for the past year and it's always going to be a piece of me. I still have the original Gibson Old Glory and, who knows, maybe someday we'll see that come out as a Gibson model too."

BOXED OUT

Unusually for an electric guitarist, Jared has all but abandoned effects pedals in favour of a more organic approach to finding his sound.

"As far as effects go, I don't really use them anymore," he says. "I love coaxing out as many sounds as I can using just the guitar and amp. A lot of players tell me they never use their tone knobs but, I swear, even in the middle of phrases I'm working the tone knob and the volume. It's so important for me.

"I DO HAVE ONE PEDAL. PEOPLE ARE GOING TO LAUGH WHEN THEY FIND OUT WHAT IT IS – 'OH, THIS GUY'S SUCH A CORK-SNIFFER!' – BUT IT'S A KLON CENTAUR. I USE IT AS A PREAMP. I JUST PUT IT ON TOP OF MY AMP, DIAL IN MY SETTINGS AND LEAVE IT ON. IT SOUNDS BEAUTIFUL"

"It's a beautiful thing to limit yourself to the bare minimum. You get to a point where you're in survival mode and you have to make all these sounds on your own. I don't even have a tuner! That's become almost like an attitude thing for me now. I'll tune up before we play our set but everything else I'm just going to figure out while I'm on stage."

There is still one box that forms as essential part of his sound, however, and it's a beauty.

"I do have one pedal, which was a present from Joe Bonamassa," says Jared. "People are going to laugh when they find out what it is – 'Oh, this guy's such a cork-sniffer!' – but it's a Klon Centaur. I use it as a preamp; I just put it on top of my amp, dial in my settings and leave it on. It sounds beautiful.

"You know what, though? The other night, while I was jamming with Bonamassa and his band, the battery died so I didn't even use it, and guess what? It was okay! I made it through!"

When it comes to amps, Jared plugs into his signature Blackstar JJN-20RH heads on stage every night. It's an amp that has proved particularly popular with punters and, of course, the man himself.

ABOVE Jared's one and only pedal is a Klon Centaur, a gift from Joe Bonamassa

FACING PAGE Jared's main squeeze these days is 'Ole Red', a refinished 1953 Goldtop given to him by collector Charles Daughtry

Indeed, so committed is Jared to his friends at Blackstar that he refuses the offer of a refreshing beverage that just so happens to boast a rival amp company's branding.

"I won't drink that, man," he says, jokingly. "I'm a Blackstar artist. Blackstar amps taste better! Seriously though, they have been amazing to work with and I know I'll get my sound on stage every night. That means a lot to me."

GOLDEN RETRIEVALS

While Old Glory and its signature siblings are Jared's onstage squeezes, he's not one to turn his nose up at a nice old guitar. Recently, a chance meeting with one of the most significant figures on the vintage Gibson scene saw Jared get an education in golden-era guitars – as well as a couple of extraordinary instruments.

"I met Charles Daughtry [the vintage guitar aficionado who runs the Les Paul Forum] last year at NAMM," says Jared. "He said, 'If you're ever down in Texas, you should give me a call.' I was passing through on tour with John 5 a few weeks later, so I got in touch.

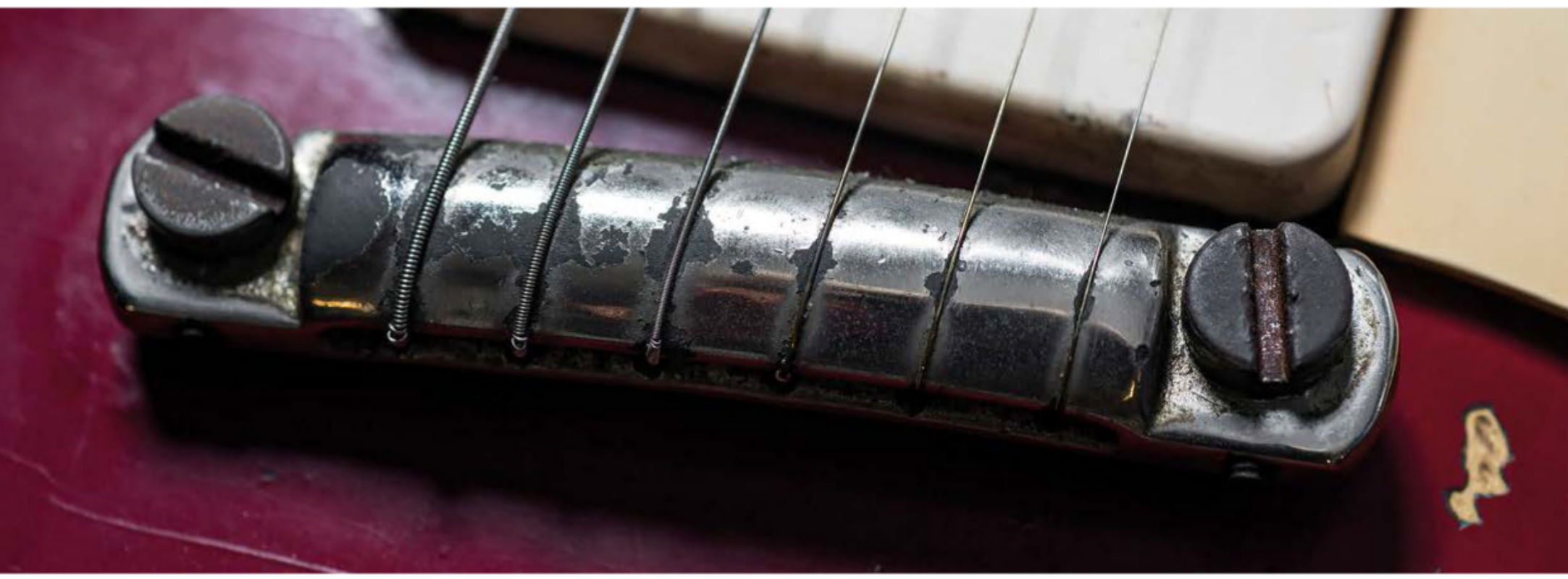
"He picked me up, took me to his home, opened the door to this room and my jaw just dropped. Every golden-era Gibson possible was hanging on the walls. It was the first time someone had brought me 20 beautiful vintage instruments, one after the other: '59s, Goldtops, crazy stuff.

"He said, 'You like P-90s right?' and passed me a 1956 Les Paul Junior. I plugged it in, hit one note and it started singing to me. It was love at first sight. The next thing I knew, he'd left the room, come back with the case and said, 'Take it, it's not doing any good sitting here!'

"So I go and play the gig, and I show up at the venue just shell-shocked – I have a '56 Junior now. I couldn't believe what had just happened. That was my introduction to vintage guitars."

"I WAS JAMMING ON BONAMASSA'S BLUES CRUISE AND I FLIPPED TO THE NECK PICKUP AND HIT A BEND AND HELD IT FOR ABOUT 30 SECONDS – THE WHOLE GUITAR WAS VIBRATING. WHEN YOU GET THOSE OLD GUITARS AT THE APPROPRIATE VOLUME, SOMETHING MAGICAL HAPPENS"

GARY E.



THIS SPREAD Dakota Red was applied to this 1953 Goldtop during the 1960s, so its finish has aged twice. It also bears the names of a past owner and Jared's dad, Jim

RED PERIL

In recent months, Jared has been seen on stage with 'Ole Red', a very different Les Paul to his signature models. As ever, there's a story behind its achingly cool vintage vibe.

"A few months down the road, I visit Charlie again and he's got more stuff he wants to show me," says Jared. "There was one guitar there that I couldn't take my eyes off, a gorgeous 1953 Goldtop that had been oversprayed. The back of the body and back of the neck are black, and a coat of Dakota Red was sprayed over the Goldtop at some point in the 1960s. It's a really old overspray. The Goldtop finish was already aged, and the Dakota Red has aged over it, so now it's a double-aged guitar. I couldn't put it down. It just spoke to me and, as I was getting ready to leave, Charlie said, 'You've got to take Red.'

"Now I'm now the proud owner of a real 1950s Les Paul. Those guitars inspire you in a lot of ways. I know how that sounds but I can say this because for many years I toured with just one guitar and I'm not a snob. I believe that, if any guitar, at any price, speaks to you and makes you want to play better and be a more expressive musician, that's all that matters.

ABOVE Ole Red has already accompanied Jared to many shows, including Joe Bonamassa's most recent Keeping The Blues Alive At Sea cruise

"I was jamming on Bonamassa's blues cruise and I flipped to the neck pickup and hit a bend and held it for about 30 seconds – the whole guitar was vibrating. When you get those old guitars at the appropriate volume, something magical happens."

Touring the world with your own power trio is a dream for many aspiring rockers but we wonder if Jared has plans to expand his line-up. A four-piece perhaps? Five? His answer is unequivocal.

"I've been fronting my own trios since I was 18," he says. "I met Dennis [Holm], the drummer, in LA when I was living there. That was about seven years ago. Baron [Fox] joined us on bass about seven months ago. I like to keep things pretty simple. A lot of my favourite music was created within a trio – Hendrix, Cream, Robin Trower – I just love that format.

"The next step for us after we're finished with this European tour is to hit the studio and make a record – a real record. My aspirations are pretty simple. Last year, I was out there on the road touring for 308 days straight and, by the end of it all, I was just absolutely exhausted but so happy. I just want to play to anyone who wants to listen – I want to play to as many people as possible."

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IT'S ONLY
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LABOUR OF LOVELL

As Larkin Poe return with *Self Made Man,* their most kinetic and powerful album to date, we sit down with Rebecca and Megan Lovell to talk meltdowns, kicking down doors, and remaining optimistic in trying times

WORDS HUW BAINES

If the art of album sequencing has fallen by the wayside in the age of outside curation by streaming services, then Larkin Poe didn't get the memo. The roots-rock duo's new LP, *Self Made Man*, sparks into life with the thud of a kick drum, the thrum of power chords and a molasses-thick riff. It's a classic example of the opener as statement – the affirmation in this case being that things have changed around these parts. As guitarist Rebecca Lovell puts it, "If you're not going to kick down the door, why go into the room?"

The song in question is the title track of sorts, *She's A Self Made Man*. It exists at an exciting remove from the brass-vocal workout *Sometimes*, which led Larkin Poe's adventurous 2018 album *Venom & Faith*, and it's not a red herring. As a whole, *Self Made Man* is a bold, confident left turn into chunky guitar lines and the golden hues of classic rock.

"We've been spending a lot of time self-discovering over the past three to five years and this album is a peak moment for us in our late-twenties, early-thirties," says Rebecca, on the line from Nashville, where she's joined by her sister and spiky lap steel accomplice Megan. "We know who we are and we're moving into our own."

The foundations for this stylistic shake-up have been in situ for a long time. The Lovells' music is a vintage fusion of influences and life experience, stemming from their youth in Atlanta, Georgia. As kids, they were schooled in classical music by their mother while glomming rock gems from their father's record collection, eventually winding up in bluegrass territory and releasing three albums of acoustic folk as the Lovell Sisters alongside their eldest sibling Jessica.

That band split in 2010, leaving peace and quiet in the rearview mirror. Larkin Poe cropped up around the bend the following year, with their debut album *Kin* making a ruckus in 2014 with the blues-pop lilt of songs such as *Don't* and the low-slung outlaw licks of *Sugar High*.

SELF CONTROL

New album *Self Made Man* is held aloft by this varied personal history, blending honeyed harmonies with thunderous riffs and Megan's snaking lap steel counterpoints. It's no surprise to hear that the sisters view the record as a culmination of sorts, following the feverish work ethic that's helped them put out five full-length LPs in six years.

"We were armed with a lot of knowledge from the previous records we'd made and, as we've gotten older, we've figured out what truly feels like us, what sounds represent us," says Rebecca. "I think that comes out in the album, with more vulnerability, with more space, with a lot more harmony that harks back to our childhood growing up with the blues."

It may stand apart stylistically but *Self Made Man* has something important in common with 2018's *Venom & Faith*: it was self-produced by the Lovells with help from engineer Roger Alan Nichols at his Nashville studio Bell Tone Recording. But how do you go about pressing reset as a producer when you're also the ones responsible for the nuts and bolts of the songs?

"I'm going to be a loudmouth sister and take this question as well," says Rebecca, to peals of laughter. "At the beginning of every record, you have kind of a mini-meltdown. I feel like I do, because it's a big task at the outset. When you're standing on the threshold of a new record, it can feel a little daunting. You don't want to repeat yourself. You want to reinvent yourself and to make something new, and sometimes that can feel challenging. After all, we are only ourselves – we know our stories and we know where we've been.

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ABOVE Megan (left) and Rebecca Lovell on stage in New Orleans in 2019. Extensive touring provided plenty of "fresh fodder" for when the sisters returned to the recording studio

"You're trying to figure out how to look at yourself from a self-production standpoint. As a producer, how do you look at yourself as an artist and decide where to shape and tweak and pinch and twist and change? With this album, I feel that Megan and I, even more than on previous albums, came together as sisters and were very real with one another about what we thought was working and what wasn't."

The Lovells' latest is very much a *studio* record; the details came to life within those four walls. After wrapping up the tour for *Venom & Faith*, Larkin Poe took some time out and spent a month workshopping ideas. This period of rumination allowed the sisters to take stock of the ways their circumstances had altered, and they parlayed their recent growth as a live unit into their writing. "Even though the past three records have come in relatively quick succession," says Megan, "we've been so lucky to have done massive amounts of touring between each one.

"You have all this fresh fodder coming through from touring. We were like road dogs between *Venom & Faith* and this album, and we were playing shows like we never had before. Having entire tours selling out was new for us and we felt a kind of groundswell beneath us. That prompted us to write differently too. We were enjoying singing with the audience, because they were coming in knowing the lyrics to every song. We'd never experienced that before; imagining singing these new songs with people was very inspirational."

COMMUNAL SPIRIT

There are moments on *Self Made Man* where the Lovells' channelling of this rabble-rousing communal spirit is abundantly clear. The single *Holy Ghost Fire* sounds as if it were precision-engineered for crowd participation, bouncing from the lyric, "Who's gonna help me carry my load?" into a call-and-response section before igniting in a shout-along chorus.

“ADDRESSING YOUR EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS WITH RESPECT CAN BE JUST AS ROCK ’N’ ROLL AS RUNNY EYELINER AND COMBAT BOOTS”

ABOVE Rebecca swapped the bridge pickup on her Stratocaster for a humbucker, while Megan favours her 1950s Rickenbacker lap steel

“One comment we get from fans after the shows is that, when we play on stage, we create a lot of joy,” says Megan, “and we love that. We consider our shows to be a safe harbour where people can come together, and there should be some joy in music. You can have the blues, and use music to exorcise your demons, but music can also bring joy to people. This record is definitely a reflection of that feeling of optimism and love and community.”

Many feel that those qualities are in short supply at the moment and, judging by *Self Made Man*’s lyric sheet, the Lovells are painfully aware of that. Here, Larkin Poe have attempted to distil some good vibes, sketching vignettes that emphasise the feeling of taking your licks, gritting your teeth and pushing on through to the other side. “We really had a sense of the stories we wanted to put across,” says Rebecca, “specifically stories that we felt brought us together with our fans and our family into one big group of music lovers.”

This outlook ties in with the grown-up, quixotic, and almost anti-cool attitude to rock ’n’ roll that has become Larkin Poe’s stock-in-trade. There are monolithic riffs to be found on *Self Made Man*, that’s for certain, and they’re accompanied by moments of grandstanding cleverly designed to whip crowds into rapture. But, as ever with the Nashville-based outfit, there’s precious little in the way of empty posturing on their fifth album. “Both Megan and myself are intrinsically optimistic people,” says Rebecca. “We’re very balanced – we have a strong family, we cook, we go on hikes. We’re very normal. We’re not tortured artists at all.

“We have private crosses that we bear – that’s true of everyone – but when we approach music, I sometimes feel weary of this sense that rock has to conform to a series of moves pertaining to sex, drugs and rock ’n’ roll. Those words don’t necessarily have anything in common. Rock ’n’ roll can be defined in any way we choose. For us, that’s in enjoying it, that’s in community, that’s in being balanced, that’s in addressing your emotional problems with yourself, your significant other or your family with respect. That, to me, can be just as rock ’n’ roll as runny eyeliner and combat boots.”

IT'S ONLY
ROCK &
ROLL

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“MY APPROACH TO PLAYING IS THAT THE LAP STEEL IS A VOCAL INSTRUMENT. I JUST LOVE TO SING WITH HER WITH MY GUITAR. WE LOVE US SOME ‘GUITARMONIES’ AND TWINNING BACK AND FORTH”

ABOVE Another day on the road for the band in 2019, this time at the Kaaboo Texas festival

WOOD AND STEEL

This antithetical take on dyed-in-the-wool rock tropes also manifests itself in the presentation of *Self Made Man*. Counterbalancing Rebecca’s guitar licks and the searing breaks provided by Megan’s 1950s Rickenbacker lap steel are woody acoustic tones that pop and whirr, and add a wholesome percussive edge to the LP. It’s a throwback to their Lovell Sisters days, and a quirk that feels entirely lived-in. “Megan and I have a taste for textures that don’t necessarily align with a full band presentation,” says Rebecca. “We look for textures that feel more bound by time and place, dig deep and find things that feel more organic, and are reminiscent of chopping wood or stomping on hard floors – sounds that are more natural. We had so much fun playing around with that concept on these tracks. There are little easter eggs hidden throughout the record that we’ll hear and turn into ear candy.”

But when the Lovells kick into high gear, as they do for the swampy blues of *Every Bird That Flies* and the solo-heavy jam *Ex-Con*, the sisters are able to keep this earthy aspect of their sound intact.

Much of that stems from the ease with which the elements of their musical make-up are grafted onto their songs, with guitar and lap steel parts finding pockets of space around Rebecca’s vocals. On *Self Made Man*, the sisters seem to have perfected the intricacies of this triple-threat attack.

“My approach to playing is that the lap steel is a vocal instrument,” says Megan. “I just love to sing with her with my guitar. We grew up listening to a lot of Queen, where the guitar melodies are just as singable as the vocal melodies. We just love us some ‘guitarmonies’, and twinning back and forth between Rebecca and I. That’s one of our favourite things to do on stage too.”

Rebecca picks up the thought. “I think, quite unexpectedly, the lap steel has ended up being a shaping element of our band,” she says. “There are moments on stage where you can sense that we kind of have two lead vocalists. It’s not like Megan just takes solos. It’s sort of a weird singing thing that happens when she’s playing the slide. I love that.”

This well-oiled system is bolstered further by a no-frills take on equipment. Megan has long been inseparable from her Rickenbacker lap steels, after being pointed in the direction of one for sale at Gruhn Guitars in Nashville by her Dobro teacher, and while Rebecca is the proud owner of some mouth-watering guitars, she stops a few steps short of identifying as a full-on gear-head.

She's a Fender devotee, bouncing between Jazzmasters – of both Fender manufacture and replicas courtesy of boutique maker Bill Nash – and, more recently, Strats. While making *Self Made Man*, the sisters stuck to what they knew would work, which is something many artists take much longer to figure out. In their minds, this album had to sound how it sounds, and that's readily apparent from the moment you drop the needle on side one.

"We played around but I don't think bells and whistles and smoke and mirrors play into the way we record ourselves all that much," says Rebecca. "We have made records where we turned the studio into more of a laboratory, and sometimes songs and even artists can get lost in that maze.

"It's tempting, when you're in the studio, to contort yourself into something you're not. We know what Megan's lap steel needs to sound like, and even when approaching vocal sounds we err on the side of the very natural. We don't want to tune or tweak the humanity out. *Self Made Man* is about stripping it back and being who we are."

***Self Made Man* is out 12 June via Tricki-Woo Records**

THE INDUSTRY INTERVIEW

Chris Martin IV

The Martin Guitar CEO talks heritage, innovation and turning around the fortunes of America's oldest guitar company

WORDS GARY COOPER
PORTRAITS MARTIN GUITAR
MUSEUM IMAGES ELEANOR JANE

For all their hell-raising, wild living and love of anti-establishment posturing, guitarists can be as besotted with heritage as any card-carrying National Trust devotee – and no brand delivers guitar heritage better than CF Martin & Company. The Nazareth, Pennsylvania-based doyen of acoustic guitars was founded in New York by German émigré Christian Frederick (Friedrich) Martin in 1833 and was one of the pioneers of the steel-string acoustic guitar, which was to become an essential component of popular music throughout the 20th century.

Plenty of other companies came and went during the intervening 187 years but Martin persevered and prospered – though not without a few ups and downs along the way – setting the benchmark against which other premium-quality acoustic instruments are measured.

OPPOSITE The Martin archive contains accounts and sales ledgers from the earliest days of the company

What allowed Martin to climb to the top of the tree and remain there for the best part of 200 years? It wasn't just product innovation. It's true that Martin was at the bleeding edge of new developments in guitar-making, such as X-bracing and dovetail neck joints, and once it was perfected in the 1930s, the dreadnought became one of the most copied guitar shapes in history.

Similarly, the adoption of the 14th-fret body joint had a significant impact on the sound and playability of the modern acoustic guitar and was once again pretty much copied by everybody else.

What really set Martin apart, though, was quality, both of manufacture and sound – and what ensured both was an uncompromising sense of tradition. Martin remained a family-owned and run business and, however much a hired CEO may love their company and its products, it's tough to imagine they could feel quite the same way about guarding the Martin name and legacy as Chris Martin IV does – the great-great-great-grandson of its founder, who runs the company today as chairman and CEO.

That isn't to say that hiring family is a guaranteed way of getting things right. Chris is quite candid about the strained relationship he had with his father, Frank Herbert Martin, and how it was Chris's grandfather, CF Martin III, who rescued the business after a few questionable decisions and a major union dispute threatened to run it off the rails in the 1970s. It's no secret that grandfather Martin saved the business and mentored Chris, who has been a popular and famously steady hand at the helm since he took over in 1986.

Over the years, Chris Martin has matured into the role of head of one of the world's most important instrument-makers and is widely admired in the industry. This appreciation recently culminated in his appointment as the chair of NAMM, the prestigious US musical instrument trade association. He talks with a rare candour, his answers free from jargon.

We begin by asking whether he'd always known that he would one day work in the family firm.

"No. My parents were divorced. It was a bad divorce. My mom did nothing whatsoever to encourage me to even pay attention to the business. My grandparents though, Mr Martin and my grandmother Daisy, must have recognised that there was a possibility that I would become the next Martin. My father and I had a challenging relationship but my grandfather Martin and my grandmother Martin would go out of their way to get me to Nazareth for a week or two in the summer, where I was exposed to the business."

Oddly enough, though, it was a Californian guitar-shop owner who finally tipped the scales.

"Fred Walecki was visiting the factory and asked if I was going to join the family business. I said that I didn't know, because, at the time, I was considering going to the university of Miami to study marine biology. I had this image of scuba diving all day long."

Walecki put another proposition to Chris: that he should come down to Los Angeles, attend UCLA and work in his music store to give him a taste of the business. "I thought, 'Okay, what the hell?'" says Chris. "Anyway, UCLA accepts me and I'm working in Fred's store, and he says, 'Okay, go sell Martin guitars.' I told him that I didn't know how to do that and he realised I didn't know anything about Martin guitars. So he suggested that I go in the back instead and help John Carruthers repair Martins. So I went in the back and John, who was the sweetest soul, gave me products and I could see in his face he was thinking, 'Not only does he not know anything at all about his family business but he knows even less about how to repair the guitars his family business makes.' They were so accommodating of this buffoon that they had inadvertently hired.

"Meanwhile, I felt like a fish out of water at UCLA, which had 29,000 students and all of them seemed to look better, drive a fancier car, and have more money than me. I called my mom after two quarters there and I said, 'I've got to leave here. I want to go back and I want to work in the factory and really find out how Martin guitars are made.' There was silence on the phone, followed by, 'What did you just say?!' Oh boy, she was not happy. My father said, 'You want to do what?!' He had never worked in the factory. But my grandfather said, 'That's an interesting idea…'"

Chris was put on a fast track. Usually Martin-factory workers specialise in a single job but Chris was instead shown the entire process, top to bottom.

"I came away from that experience with a great deal of respect for my colleagues and enough knowledge that I could say I was out there, I knew how they were made. My favourite line is, 'Unlike Bob Taylor, Chris Martin is *dangerous* with a chisel.'"

However, all was not well with the company. "It was challenging," says Chris. "My grandfather and grandmother sent me to the local community college and my mom said I had to go and get a degree, so I had something to fall back on [Chris has a business degree from Boston]. Meanwhile, in that time period, the company was unionised and went on strike.

"This was a dark time. Ultimately, the union disintegrated. But in the meantime, three of the four acquisitions my father had made were failing – buying Dacron strings was a brilliant move but Vega guitars, Fibes drums and Levin guitars never made money. Particularly Levin, which became a drag, because we were propping up this really inefficient factory in Sweden.

"The strategy there was that we needed some distribution for Martin in Europe and Levin had a sales force, which is what my father thought he was buying. But he inadvertently bought an inefficient factory. Ultimately, the banks started breathing down our necks because, at the same time, acoustic guitar sales had fallen off a cliff – thank you, disco and the Yamaha DX7. So my father's strategy at that point was to retire.

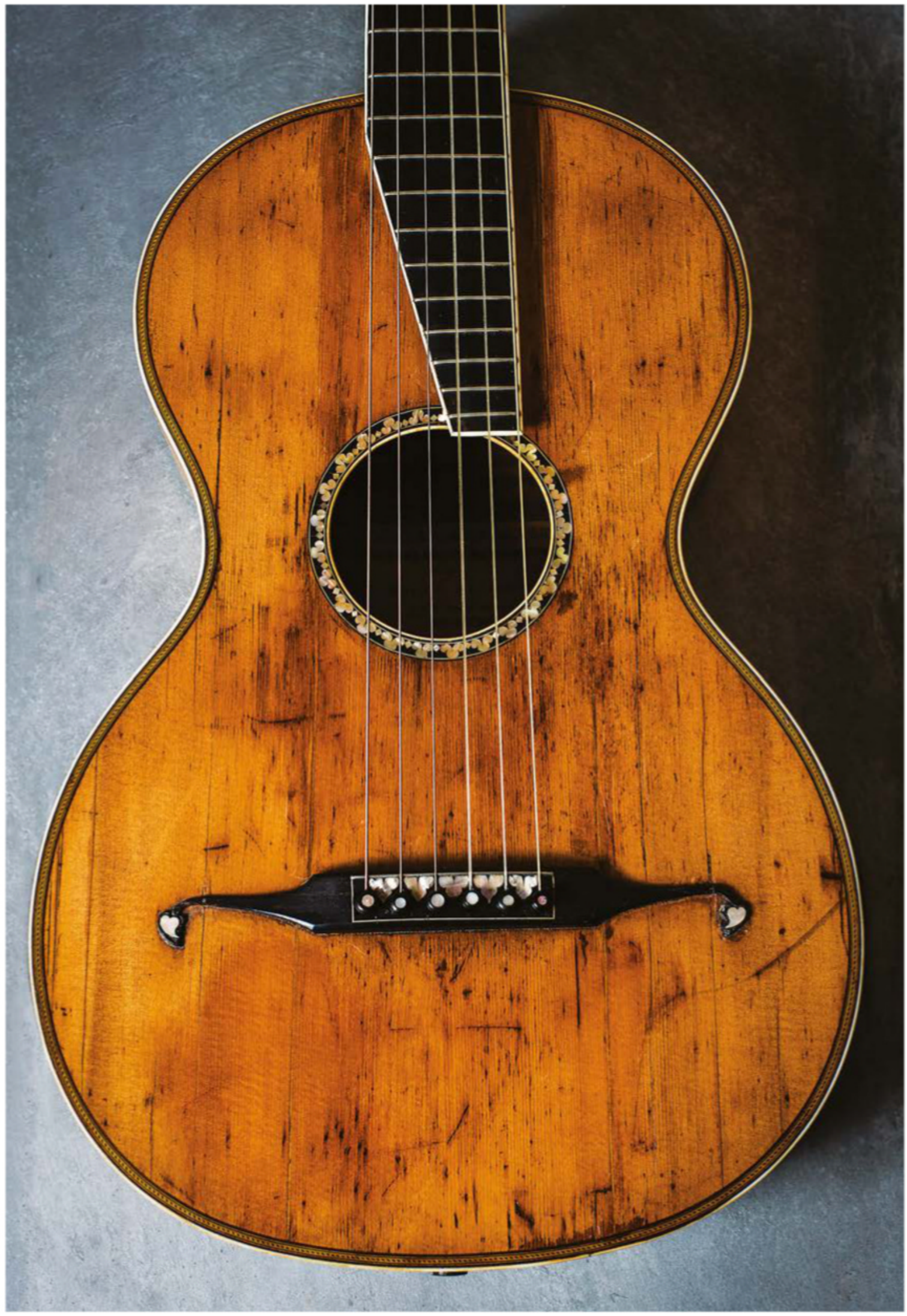
"So now I'm back, working and bouncing around the office, travelling a bit with the elder statesmen sales reps, who would drag me along with them. This was where my fascination with travelling and telling the Martin story began. With my father resigning, my grandfather had to reassert himself – I think he was in his nineties at the time. Then, he passed away, which sent a shockwave through the company, the community and the industry. 'Frank has retired. CF Martin III has passed away and there's this kid that nobody knows much about.'

"I was scared to death. Business was tough. I wasn't a born leader. I was never the president of the senior class. I said to my colleagues, 'We're in a predicament here. The guitar business is bad,' – we had gone from 23,000 to 3,000 guitars a year – 'and, by the way, I am bothered by the fact that we have quality issues.'

"I WAS SCARED TO DEATH. BUSINESS WAS TOUGH. I WASN'T A BORN LEADER. I WAS NEVER THE PRESIDENT OF THE SENIOR CLASS. I SAID TO MY COLLEAGUES, 'WE'RE IN A PREDICAMENT HERE. THE GUITAR BUSINESS IS BAD'"

ABOVE RIGHT This Stauffer-style guitar is the oldest instrument in the Martin musem and was made by CF Martin Sr himself

RIGHT This label adorns the inside of the earliest documented instrument with X-bracing, delivered to soloist Madame Delores Nevares de Goñi in 1843



"And that was what really bothered me: the guitars were not intonating properly and my father and his colleagues had not really been willing to devote the time and resources to fix the problem.

"I said, 'Look, if it's only 3,000 guitars, we'll try to figure out how to make this business work, and we've got to make damn good guitars because that's what we are.' That resonated with my colleagues. I heard them say, 'I never heard Chris's father say that. I think I heard Chris's grandfather say it though – and now I'm hearing Chris say it, so I'm going to believe it's the right thing to do.'

“SUDDENLY MTV UNPLUGGED HAPPENED. ON SATURDAY NIGHTS, YOU’D TURN ON YOUR TV AND THERE WAS YOUR FAVOURITE ROCK STAR PLAYING YOUR FAVOURITE ROCK SONG ON A MARTIN GUITAR”

ABOVE The light from the old North Street factory window hits the beautifully checked finish of a vintage all-mahogany instrument

FACING PAGE This 1953 D-18, nicknamed ‘Grandpa’ due to its resemblance to a curmudgeonly old man, was owned by indie-folk musician Mary Lou Lord and played by Kurt Cobain and Elliott Smith

“It wasn’t that big a deal in the end. We fitted a compensated saddle, which fixed the intonation issue. As for the sales problem, suddenly *MTV Unplugged* happened. One day, Dick Boak, who was doing artist relations and marketing, came into my office saying he’d got a call from MTV. I said, ‘The rock-video station? What are they calling us for?’

“He said they had this crazy idea where they wanted to take famous rockers and get them to play their famous rock songs on acoustic guitars. They wanted to do some filming in New York but weren’t sure whether some of these guys even had acoustic guitars or, if they were coming from London or California, whether they would want to bring acoustics with them. They wanted to know if we would lend them a couple.

“I looked at Dick and he looked at me, and we both said, ‘And the answer is…?’ Dick would give them a call them on the Monday and they would tell him it would be so-and-so and such-and-such, so he would load up his car with guitars, drive out to New York and drop them off. Then, on the Saturday night, you would turn on your TV and there was your favourite rock star playing your favourite rock song on a Martin acoustic guitar.

“It started out slow but, as the momentum built, that show reminded people just how cool acoustic guitars can be. I give them a great deal of credit for helping my family’s business get back on its feet.”

Bob Taylor played a significant part in this story too. Throughout the 1980s, Taylor’s formula, which effectively saw his guitars approach solidbody levels of playability (and thus make them more appealing to electric guitarists), became massively successful, which spurred Martin to make its own guitars more player-friendly. Chris is quick to credit Taylor for that, and tips his hat to his rival’s use of production machinery, which Martin also adopted.

“This year, we’re going to make about 130,000 guitars. If I told my ancestors that, they would say, ‘Did you say 130,000 guitars in one year?!’ But we have the factory in Mexico today, plus a lot more technology – so thank you, Bob, for exposing us to that tech. Bob went to vo-tech school [vocational technical school in the US] in Southern California, where they prepare you to go into businesses that manipulate metal – a lot of aerospace work and R&D stuff. Bob wanted to be a guitar-builder and, since his teacher taught him how to use a CNC machine to cut metal, he was able to apply that knowledge to cutting wood. You’ve got to praise him for eliminating a lot of the waste, and the setup and tear-down that we were doing the old-fashioned way.”

For all that though, many Martin lovers are strict traditionalists. Isn’t admitting to using advanced technology a little risky?

“Yes, we can always do it the old-fashioned way and we’re very proud of being able to do that. But using machines and tooling has always been a part of the Martin DNA, it’s just that the sophistication levels available to us today are lightyears ahead of what was available to my ancestors. If a machine can make us more efficient, we will use it. Remember, no-one has invented the guitar-put-it-together machine yet. Even in Asia, ultimately all the parts of a guitar are put together by human beings and, in our case, I believe we have the most sophisticated guitar-building workforce on Earth.”

As well as efficiency, modern guitar-making technology also allows Martin and other guitar builders to maintain a higher level of consistency across their product lines. But Chris admits that the more traditionalist Martin customers sometimes pine for the days when every part of every guitar was made by hand.

“People push about that sometimes. They say that, if you look at all those golden-era guitars, they were less consistent than guitars are today. If that trips your trigger, good for you, but I don’t think that was ever my ancestors’ intention. Once they’d developed a model in their minds, I think their next thought was how they could build as many of that model as possible, as consistently as possible. Given the technology they had, they did the best they could.

"At first, when we realised that Taylor had found our Achilles heel, which was playability, we were in denial. Then, the biggest challenge became having a design and a way of building that was pretty much etched in stone, with a huge investment in that process. How could we make the guitars more playable without throwing the baby out with the bathwater? How do we accomplish this Herculean task and have it be transparent to the customer so they go, 'Wow, it looks and sounds just like a D-28 but plays like an electric guitar.' Now and again, we get called out on it, though. My favourite is when someone complains about the action on a Martin being too low and I go, 'Yes! We've arrived!'"

Not only did the action sometimes seem too low for the puritan diehards but changing neck profiles caused problems too. "Where we got the pushback wasn't so much with the height of the string off the fret, it was a combination of that and re-profiling the neck. 'This neck's too skinny. I like the old baseball-bat neck.' We had a period when we did both and we still will. We'll make you a vintage reproduction. We've taken vintage guitars from our collection, put them on a granite table and probed them with a hook-up to a computer that says, 'Okay, I understand what the shape of this neck is,' and you send that to a CNC machine and it carves the neck just like it would have been carved with a draw knife in 1937."

Given that Chris and his team put so much effort into making the Martins of today, we wonder whether the company's CEO ever gets tired of the 'golden era' mythology that surrounds the Martins of the 1930s.

"Let's put this into perspective. Even in the 1930s, we were still learning how to make guitars with steel strings in quantity. It was only 10 years earlier that they had gut strings. I think there was a lot of, 'Let's try this and see if it works,' so it varies. We're also offering a lifetime guarantee, don't forget, so they can't self-destruct in the field.

"Now, the sound that a fine instrument makes lies somewhere between it holding together for as long as you own it and, at the same time, being on the verge of self-destruction, wanting to tear itself apart. That's where the sweet spot is. I've seen overbuilt guitars that only look like a guitar from 10 feet away. They may even play okay but you can tell there's a lot of sound dying to come out of it that never will.

"I believe that guitars that have been played for 50 or 60 years have an advantage over new guitars. I tell people their new guitar will sound better in 50 years and they ask if that's a guarantee. I say, 'I guarantee, if you take that guitar and put it under your bed, it won't sound as good as if you'd played it.'"

The heat treatment of timber has made an important difference, says Chris, as has the accuracy afforded by modern manufacturing. But, it turns out, there's torrefaction and then there's *torrefaction*.

"I HAVE TO MAKE A DECISION THAT I THINK IS THE RIGHT ONE AND IT ISN'T ALWAYS BY CONSENSUS. IF I DID IT BY CONSENSUS, WE'D BE MAKING JUST THREE BRAZILIAN ROSEWOOD GUITARS A YEAR"

ABOVE Chris Martin IV in the old Martin factory on North Street in Nazareth, Pennsylvania

"I'm a layman but, as I understand it, something happens to the wood over time that torrefaction can make happen much faster. My colleagues have spent a lot of time on this and yes, you can over-torrefy wood. Our feeling is that we've dialled it in so that we're taking that top back to the 1930s. Leave it in the kiln too long and you could take it back to the 1830s – and that isn't what we're looking for.

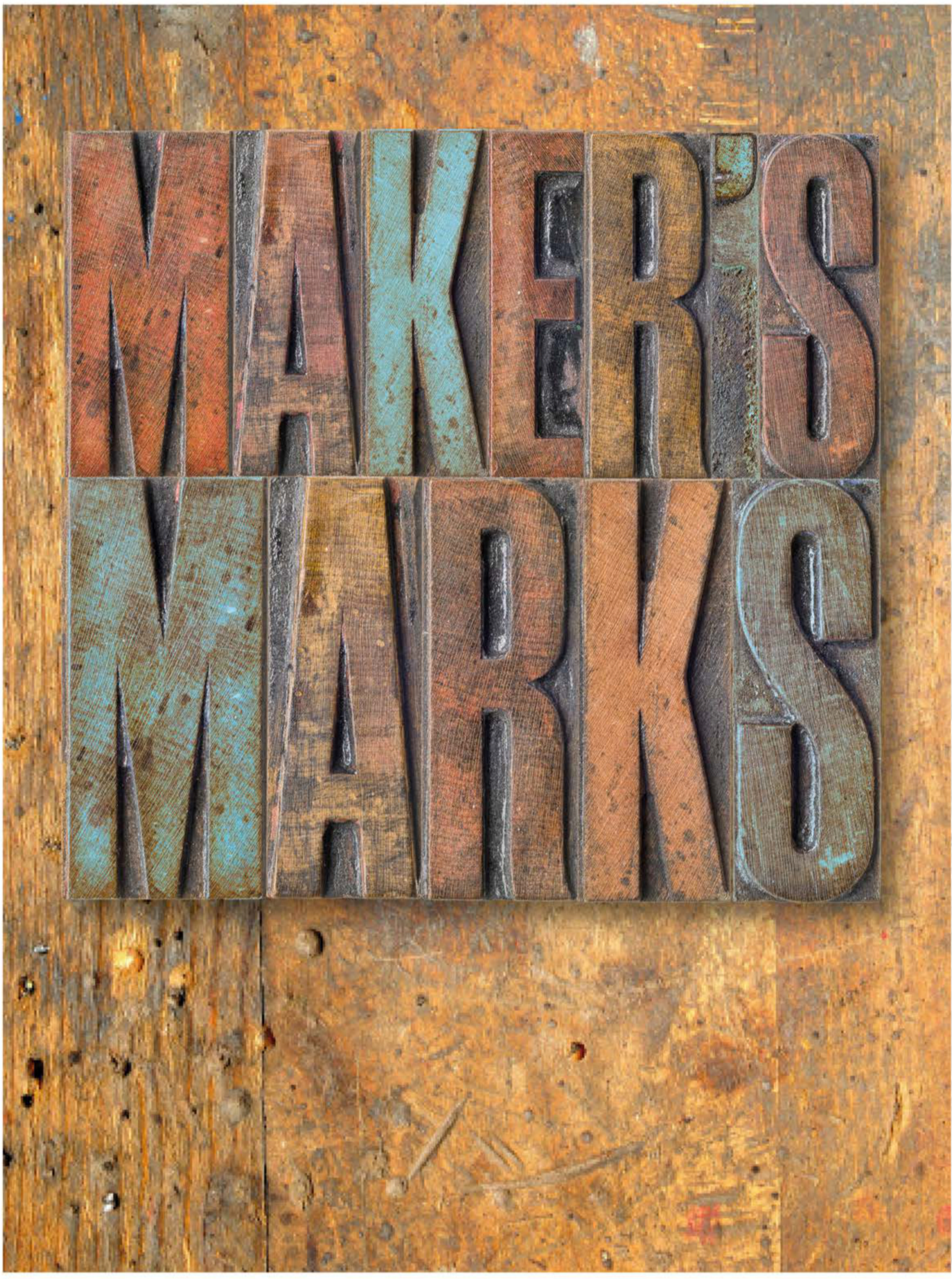
"I get the impression that a lot of people throwing around the term 'torrefaction' are tossing wood in the kiln, crossing their fingers, pulling it and saying, 'Yep, it's torrefied!' But we're trying to achieve something specific when we torrefy wood."

While the sense of tradition that surrounds Martin motivates Chris in his drive to keep the company successful, it can also be a drag on some of the things he would like to do, as he says when we ask about the prospect of Martin using new materials.

"I'm frustrated that whenever I push us to embrace using alternative materials, the traditionalists in the marketplace push back. I still get pushback on the high-pressure laminate guitars, the Stratabond neck and Richlite fingerboards. I tell them that it's still wood, it's just wood that comes from a farm. They say it's not wood, it's plastic. But it's not plastic – stop!

"I'm seeing some of the smaller luthiers changing things by saying that I'm moving on and making guitars out of new woods. Maybe that's where the trickle-down will come. The customers will change as they see individual luthiers giving alternative woods their blessing. They'll say, 'Maybe I will allow Chris to use it on a Martin.' I love that they love the company, its history and its traditions, but they sometimes think they're more responsible for the company than I am. I have to make a decision that I think is the right one and it isn't always by consensus. If I did it by consensus, we'd be making just three Brazilian rosewood guitars a year!"

When Chris becomes a historical figure in the Martin narrative, he'll be seen as one of the great Martins – a man who started from a near standstill and steered the business through its biggest period of growth, pioneered new techniques and styles of guitar and, above all else, ensured that modern Martins are as prized as they've ever been. It should be noted by future historians too that, despite the crushing pressure of familial legacies and customer expectations, he managed to remain approachable, honest and likeable while doing so.


MAKER'S
MARK

IN THE FIRST PART OF A NEW SERIES, WE FIND OUT HOW A STOLEN GRETSCH HELPED UNEARTH THE LEGACY OF GUITAR LUMINARY RAY BUTTS

WORDS MATT BLADES

The story of the electric guitar is not just one of players. It's also a tale of tinkerers, engineers and inventors, huddled day after day in their workshops, basements and garages. It's these trailblazers that have truly shaped the instrument, from the formative stages of its development to ongoing refinements today.

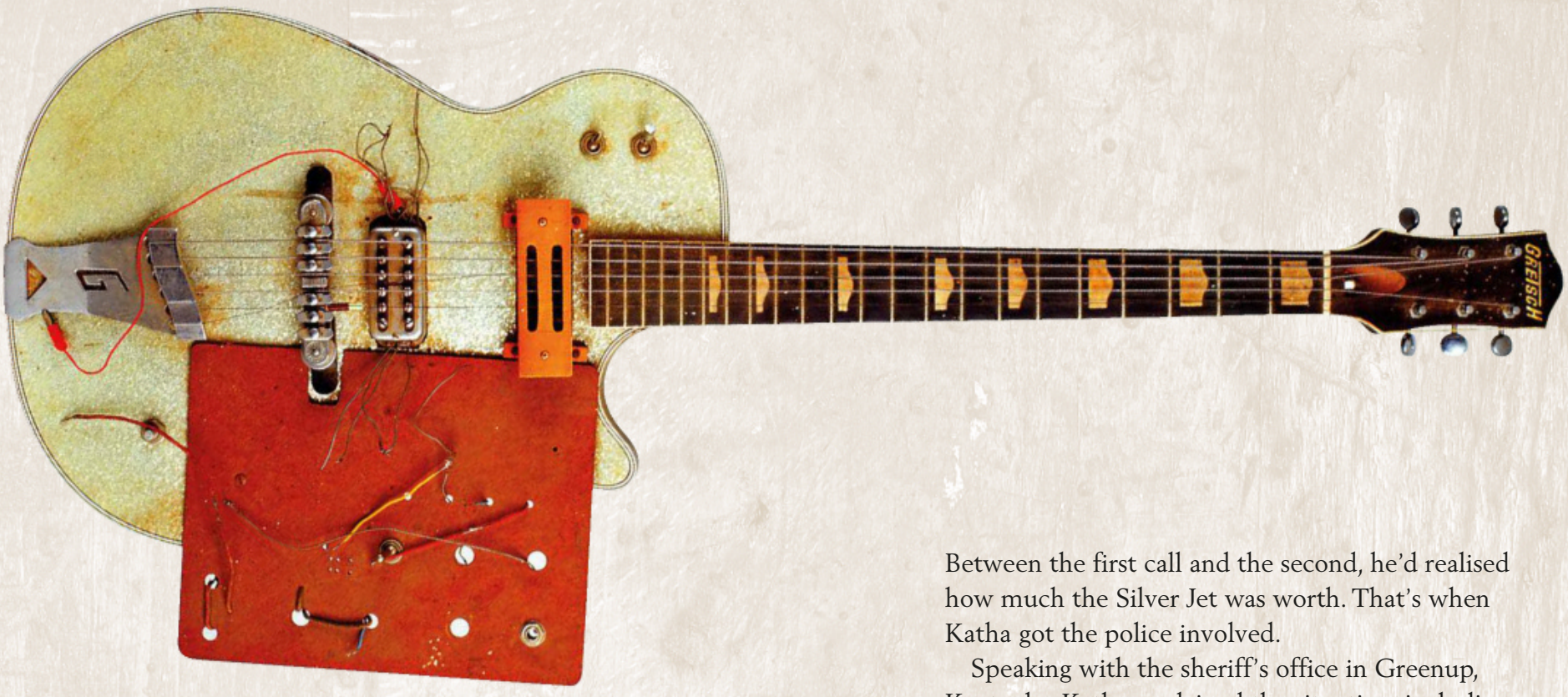
The Ray Butts story has never been told as widely nor understood as thoroughly as those of the electric guitar's 'Mount Rushmore' figures such as Leo Fender and Les Paul. But thanks to two major inventions – the Filter'Tron humbucker and EchoSonic amplifier – Ray Butts is one of the most important of the instrument's revolutionary pioneers. It took a remarkable turn of events to shed further light on his work, revealing previously unknown details about the early development of pickups and the electric guitar itself.

This is a peculiar yarn, whose players include Paul Bigsby, Ted McCarty, Chet Atkins, Fred Gretsch and Seth Lover. But it's also a story about the innovations of today and the future of the instrument, centring around one of the most celebrated tinkerers of our own time, Thomas Vincent 'TV' Jones. It's best told through a series of objects, all belonging to Butts. And, like all great tales, it begins with a mysterious telephone call.

ON THE WIRES

Tom's phone rang in 2009. Someone had got their hands on a vintage Gretsch and they were looking for advice on pickups. Tom had been offering aftermarket Filter'Tron pickups for years and was working with Gretsch on several projects at the time, so it made sense that the caller turned to him for guidance.

In order to suggest some pickups, Tom needed more information about this enigmatic guitar. As he began asking questions, he realised that there was something curious about it. The instrument started to sound familiar. On a hunch, he picked up *The Gretsch Book* by Tony Bacon and Paul Day and flipped through its pages. Sure enough, there it was: Ray Butts' pickup-tester guitar.



OPPOSITE Rediscovering Ray Butts' stolen pickup-tester Silver Jet took almost 10 years

ABOVE The instrument as seen in *The Gretsch Book* by Tony Bacon and Paul Day, complete with a section of chipboard for mounting and testing electronics

To investigate further, Tom called Paul Yandell. Paul had played professionally for many years, most notably with Chet Atkins, who he accompanied for more than two decades. When it came to Gretsch and Ray Butts, Paul knew his stuff – and he agreed: it sounded like this was the guitar.

Sadly, Ray had passed away in 2003, so Paul instead got in touch with Ray's children – his son Randy, and his daughter Katha House. "Paul called Randy and Randy called me and said, 'I think they've found dad's Silver Jet,'" says Katha.

SILVER MACHINE

What Tom didn't know at the time was that Ray Butts' Silver Jet pickup-tester guitar, as pictured in *The Gretsch Book*, had been stolen. "I had no idea it was missing," says Tom. "I just realised it was the one from the book, wondered why this guy on the phone had it, and called Paul."

Paul connected Katha and Randy to Tom. "I put Katha in touch with the guy who had the guitar," says Tom, "then I stayed out of it. I figured it was their business and not mine."

Along with several other guitars, Ray Butts' Jet had been swiped as part of a house burglary in 2000. "We got a few of them back, actually," Katha remembers, although she'd always assumed that the Silver Jet was gone for good.

Things seemed like they'd be straightforward when Katha called the guy in possession of the guitar. He was happy to hand it over if he could get back what he'd paid for it – but then he called back. "It could only have been about an hour later," says Katha. "He claimed to have developed 'an emotional attachment' to the guitar and said he wanted a lot more money."

Between the first call and the second, he'd realised how much the Silver Jet was worth. That's when Katha got the police involved.

Speaking with the sheriff's office in Greenup, Kentucky, Katha explained the situation, including the police report from the 2000 theft. It hadn't been 30 minutes before she got a call back, this time from a Deputy Darrell McCarty. "Ma'am," she remembers a strong Kentucky-accented voice saying down the line, "I'm sitting here in my car with my deputy. His name's Larry Pancake. We're at this address you gave us and, let me tell you, it ain't the best part of town. You describe this guitar to us and we'll go in and see if we can get it."

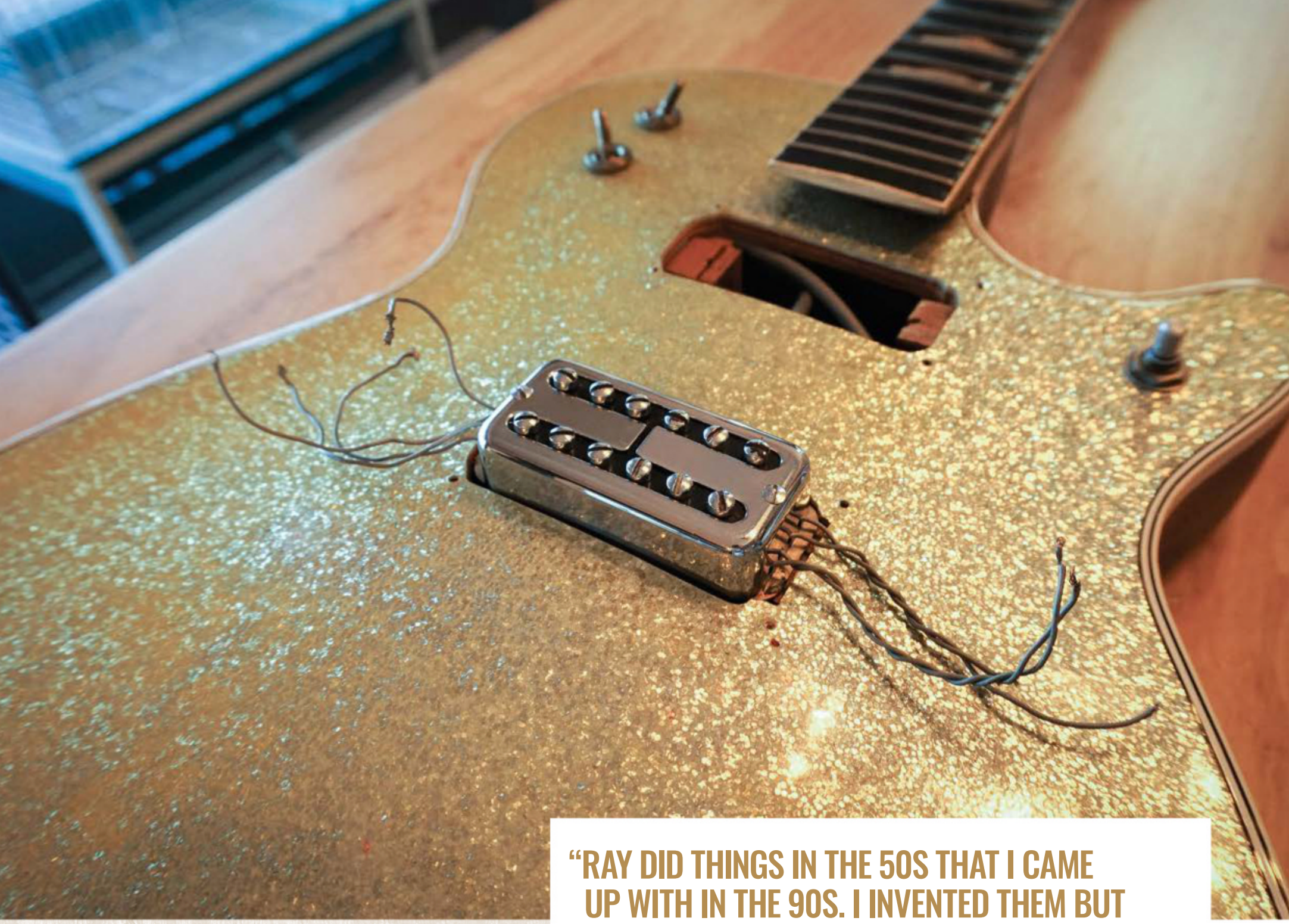
Deputies McCarty and Pancake prevailed. Once the police were in possession of the Silver Jet, Katha and Randy travelled to Kentucky to collect it. By the time they arrived, the local media had got hold of the story and a camera crew was there to interview them for the evening news.

But that's not where this story ends. Katha and Randy's journey home after collecting the guitar just so happened to overlap with a CAAS (Chet Atkins Appreciation Society) show. "There are no coincidences," says Katha. "It was meant to be – and it was meant to be during CAAS."

They took the Silver Jet in with them and were quickly swamped. "That guitar became the star of the show," says Katha. Everyone from fans of Ray Butts' work and Gretsch enthusiasts to Fred Gretsch himself came over to examine and get their picture taken with Ray's pickup-tester Jet.

It was because the recovery of the guitar coincided with the CAAS show that Katha and Randy finally got to meet Tom, who was in attendance. "When my dad was alive, we used to go with him to CAAS," says Katha, "so we'd been introduced to Tom briefly. But I was always just Ray's daughter, so I'd only said hello to people like him."

Tom asked to inspect the Jet's pickup and, meeting him properly for the first time, Katha was struck by his appreciation of her dad's work and innovations.



> “RAY DID THINGS IN THE 50S THAT I CAME UP WITH IN THE 90S. I INVENTED THEM BUT RAY HAD ALREADY DONE THEM. THEY’D JUST NEVER SEEN THE LIGHT OF DAY”

“He had an enthusiasm that you can’t disguise and you can’t make up,” she says. “You see it in his eyes and you hear it in his voice: he has a passion for dad’s work. I picked up on it immediately.” Getting to know Ray’s family and looking over his pickups made an impact on Tom too: “When I got to inspect the guitar at CAAS, I got goosebumps.”

Their serendipitous meeting also brought about something bigger. Katha and Tom stayed in touch, and she continued to be impressed by his approach to Ray’s work. “Tom’s honest,” she says. “He’s like dad. He’s not interested in mass-producing things to make millions. There are huge companies that want to get hold of dad’s original things and I just won’t give them up. But Tom’s in it for the quality; he’s like my dad. He’s more personal and that’s the way dad was.”

INSIDE THE ARCHIVE

When Katha, a registered pilot, came across an old notebook full of pickup schematics in 2014, she called Tom: “I can read schematics of hydraulics and electrics for jets, but I’m not good on guitars,” she says. “But, of course, Tom can read it, it’s what he does. So I asked him if we had anything here. He took a look and said yes.”

After making some prototypes from the diagrams, the distinctive sound and feel of the pickups was clear – as was Tom’s excitement. Katha trusted only him with the job of recreating her dad’s pickups.

It wasn’t long before they came to an agreement. Working to Ray’s original designs and with Katha’s blessing, TV Jones developed the Ray Butts Ful-Fidelity Filter’Tron (Ray’s original name for the pickup) and released it in 2017.

Recreating such an authentic vintage tone was no small feat. “Any original Ray Butts pickup was completely sealed so that they couldn’t be reverse-engineered,” says Katha. Ray wasn’t a fan of mass-manufacturing, and wanted to have control of the quality himself. He developed and progressed his designs ceaselessly to perfect them.

Bringing Ray’s Ful-Fidelity Filter’Tron to the world came from just a single notebook. Katha had boxes of Ray’s parts, designs, sketches and documents. “One day,” says Tom, “she just told me, ‘I want you to have it all.’ I was amazed.”

Tom drove out to Oregon with his wife, filled a trailer, and headed back to the TV Jones workshop with boxes upon boxes of Ray Butts’ parts, paperwork and more. It wasn’t long before he was diving into the amazing contents. “Ray did things in the 50s that I came up with in the 90s. I invented them but Ray had already done them. They’d just never seen the light of day. They were in these boxes.”

ABOVE The boxes of parts, designs, sketches and documents in the Ray Butts archive have informed the current TV Jones product line

RIGHT Tom inspects the Silver Jet, which was gifted to him by Ray's daughter Katha

The differences between their approaches were as fascinating as the similarities. "We've changed a lot of things after seeing more of Ray's work," says Tom. "We've changed alloys, winding techniques – subtle things that, when added up, make big changes."

With Ray's prototypes, originals and previously unseen developments to inspect, it's no wonder TV Jones pickups are renowned as the most vintage-accurate Gretsch-style pickups in the world today.

MYSTERY JET

As for the Silver Jet, Katha also gifted that to Tom and, upon closer inspection, it became even more fascinating. It bears small holes where Ray had attached a section of chipboard for mounting and testing electronics, and there are extra holes around the pickup cavities that are hard to match with any rings or mounts.

The pickup cavities are a mystery, too. As far as Tom can tell, they were originally routed for DeArmonds and then routed further (probably by Ray) to fit a Filter'Tron. As a tester guitar for an unremitting inventor, these modifications are hardly surprising. But the instrument is full of mystery nonetheless; there's no serial number, and parts of the construction seem anomalous.

Crouching over the guitar with a magnifying glass, *The Gretsch Book* open to show the image of Ray's testing board, Tom attempts to figure it out. "Where were those wires going? What was the battery for? What were you trying to do, Ray?"

In the boxes from Katha are things that reveal more about Ray Butts – and TV Jones. These are artefacts that tell their own stories about the early days of the electric guitar and the people involved in some of its most essential developments.

In the words of Jones himself, "It's incredible. This is really, really important." G

NEXT TIME: Who *really* invented the humbucking pickup?

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DESERT GOLD

What's even more rock 'n' roll than a Les Paul-shaped swimming pool? The real thing, of course. We head to Palm Springs to catch up with Brian Ray and find out about the 1957 Goldtop he played with Etta James and Paul McCartney

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE
PHOTOGRAPHY ELEANOR JANE

Back in 2019, with the sounds of the NAMM show still ringing in our tired ears, we visited Brian Ray at his home in Santa Monica to shoot some of the highlights of his outstanding guitar collection. But there was one instrument missing that day, and it was a big one: the battle-scarred 1957 Les Paul Goldtop he "rode hard and put away wet" at every show during the 14 or so years he spent as bandleader for the legendary soul and R&B singer Etta James.

It's not like we need much of an excuse to check out an original 1950s Goldtop but when it's a guitar as storied as Brian's, it's surely worth another trip. Fast forward 12 months to January 2020 and we find ourselves 100 miles east of LA at the guitarist's desert hideaway in Palm Springs. Bad sunsets don't seem to exist around here and, as the mountains framing the Coachella Valley begin to turn pink, it's impossible not to be charmed by the surroundings.

Sat beside his Les Paul-shaped infinity pool – which you may have seen on a recent Gibson TV show hosted by Mark Agnesi – Brian winds the clock back to a time when a PAF-loaded Lester didn't cost the same as a modest house.

"I purchased the guitar in 1973 from my half-sister's boyfriend, a guy named Chris," says Brian. "He'd bought it in New York at Manny's or possibly We Buy Guitars, which was next to Manny's. I eventually learnt that he'd paid $550 for it and sold it on to me at a handsome profit, for $850. By then, flametops were going for about a thousand dollars. But $850 in 1973 would be three months' rent. That's kind of how it was back then. It was a lot of money to spend on a guitar but it was my one-and-only for the longest time.

"I played it with Etta James on every single sweaty little gig we had, from Downtown LA and Watts to the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland. It was my main guitar for all of those years and it remains my number one. If I only had one guitar, this would be the one."

An emphatic "exactly!" is Brian's response when we ask if that makes the Goldtop the guitar he'd save from a burning building. But for a man whose staggering collection includes pieces as special as an original Burst, it's a very tough call indeed. "When you have a '59 as well, it's hard to say that," he says. "I'd see if I could take 'em both! But the Goldtop would be the one."

Gibson
PRESLEY
NASA

“I PLAYED IT WITH ETTA JAMES ON EVERY SINGLE SWEATY LITTLE GIG WE HAD, FROM DOWNTOWN LA AND WATTS TO THE MONTREUX JAZZ FESTIVAL IN SWITZERLAND. IT WAS MY MAIN GUITAR FOR ALL OF THOSE YEARS AND IT REMAINS MY NUMBER ONE”

Brian’s photo archive includes pictures of him playing the Goldtop as a teenager and Keith Richards using it during a guest spot with Etta James

UNDER THE COVERS

When Brian first bought this guitar, its pickups were not the originals and their covers had been removed but they “sounded great” all the same. “I used them for a long time and probably sweated through one of the windings or something,” he says. “In the mid-80s, I decided I was gonna go about restoring this. I knew the parts were getting rarer. Now it’s an almost insurmountable task to restore all the screws, wires, pickups, plastic bits, tune-o-matic, and all that stuff.

“As with many players at that time, we were just looking to have tools that worked well. We didn’t care about originality in the 1970s. But now we do.
In about 1987, I went about collecting all the parts for it, looking in *The Recycler*, talking to my guys in guitar shops across the planet, getting this part and that part. I collected them all and brought them to Steve Soest in Orange County – a well-known repairman, one of the old guard – and he put ’em all together.”

It’s impossible to argue with the results – this is one of the coolest Goldtops we’ve ever handled, and combined with decades of play-wear, the neck has that spectacular soft-shouldered 1950s carve you encounter so rarely on even the finest reissues. Yet Brian’s bond with this guitar goes deeper than the way it feels or sounds.

Gibson

SCHALLER
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“IT WAS MY BEST FRIEND. I LITERALLY SLEPT NEXT TO IT FOR MANY MONTHS, I WAS SO IN LOVE WITH IT. IT CRIED FOR ME, IT LAUGHED WITH ME, IT SCREAMED AND IT TALKED. IT WAS REALLY MY BUDDY, AND STILL IS”

The deep gouge in the instrument’s back was repaired in makeshift fashion, using bubblegum

“That guitar was expressing my inner feelings at a time, as a teenager, when I didn’t have the words for them,” he says. “It was my best friend. I literally slept next to it for many months, I was so in love with it. It cried for me, it laughed with me, it screamed and it talked. It was really my buddy, and still is.”

OFF THE ROAD

Although Brian’s Goldtop was used with Paul McCartney on numerous occasions, it’s been retired from the stage for a while, with a Rick Nielsen signature model taking its place whenever a Les Paul is required. One of the Goldtop’s final live outings was certainly a memorable one, but it could have ended in disaster.

“The risk of having it out there and the possibility of it getting broken or damaged was too great for me to bear,” says Brian. “One of the last times I used it with Paul was on the 2012 Grammy show, with Joe Walsh, Dave Grohl, Bruce Springsteen, Paul, Rusty [Anderson] and I all doing the guitar jam at the end of *The End*.

“We were rehearsing for it, and I looked across the stage and there it was, in the dark, on a single guitar stand with nobody around. I just thought to myself, ‘What the hell is going on here?’ And I went and grabbed it and put it next to the amp and kind of gave my guitar tech a little bit of a bollocking. He said, ‘I thought it would be safe there out of traffic,’ and I’m like, ‘In the dark?!’ Anyway that was it for me, that was when I decided to keep her at home.”

SOUL SURVIVOR

Now safely tucked away, the Goldtop survived some wild nights on the road – there’s even a gouge around the back that was repaired with bubblegum. Etta James and her band toured with The Rolling Stones between

ABOVE Brian's Palm Springs retreat features a swimming pool shaped like a Les Paul, with 'Les Pool' inlayed into the floor at the headstock end

RIGHT During the shoot we noticed two small dings forming the shape of a letter 'B' near the control knobs

1978 and 1980, and the Les Paul went along for the ride. During a period Brian describes as an "amazing time", the Stones were promoting their *Some Girls* and *Emotional Rescue* LPs in venues ranging from intimate theatres to 55,000-seaters.

"It was just like, oh my god, I've died and gone to heaven to be on this fucking stage with these guys," says Brian. Among his souvenirs from the period is a black and white photograph of Keith Richards playing the '57 Goldtop with Etta James.

"Although I was still getting loaded, the memory of that night is pretty specific – things like that start to clarify your memories," says Brian, with a laugh. "This particular show was at The Bitter End in New York. Keith was there with his lovely wife Patti Hansen, Ronnie Wood was there with his lovely wife at the time, Jo, plus Bonnie Raitt and a couple of her cohorts. It was a memorable night. We had some pictures backstage, just talking and jawing, drinking and laughing.

"When Keith was in the crowd, Etta would give me a look that would mean she was gonna invite him up. And he'd graciously accept and come up, and I'd hand him my guitar, set the amp and go and watch. I was right in front of him when that shot was taken.

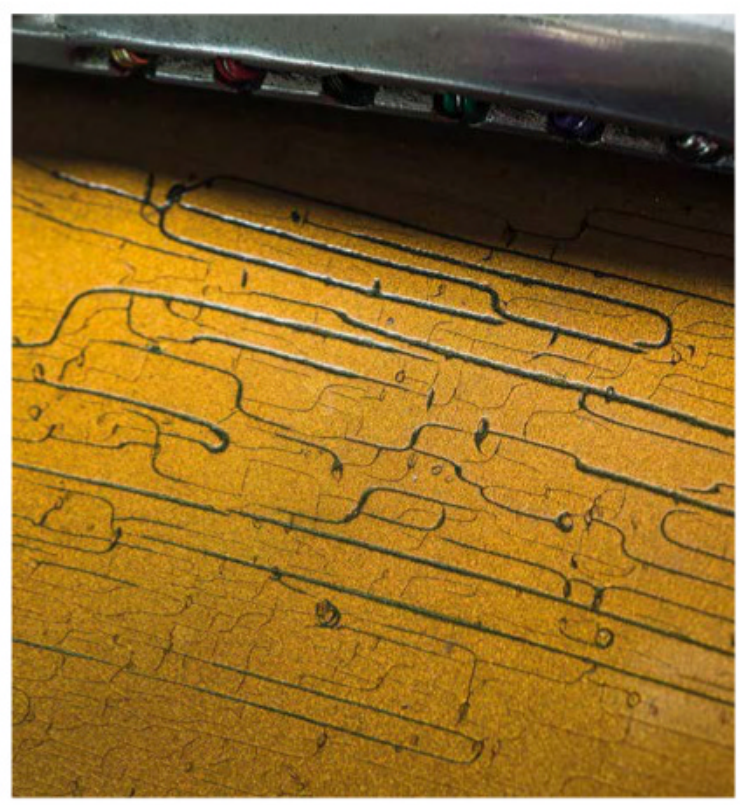
When Brian bought the guitar in 1973, many of its parts weren't original, but he set about tracking down period-correct parts and reinstating them in the 80s

They played *Rock Me Baby* and *You Got Me Runnin'*. They played two great blues songs and Keith just ripped and had a great time. He did this a handful of times. He loved Etta and she loved him. They were very close. They even had a mock wedding backstage that they presided over themselves!"

Our conversation soon veers off on a musical tour that takes in *(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction*, the formative influence of pianist Johnnie Johnson on Chuck Berry's guitar playing and the huge contribution of horn players to the evolution of the guitar riff.

It's time to return the guitar to its case – which features a sticker from 1970s US TV show *The Midnight Special*, on which Brian performed with Etta James – but, before we head off into the neon-lit Palm Springs night, he has a few other interesting guitars to show us. Stay tuned for those in a future issue. G

Follow Brian on Instagram: @brianrayguitar



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Los Angeles

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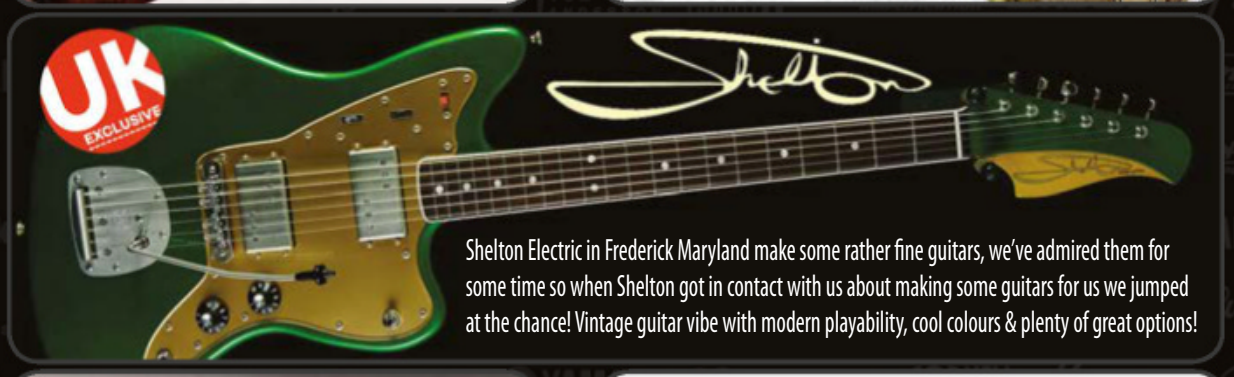

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Shelton Electric in Frederick Maryland make some rather fine guitars, we've admired them for some time so when Shelton got in contact with us about making some guitars for us we jumped at the chance! Vintage guitar vibe with modern playability, cool colours & plenty of great options!

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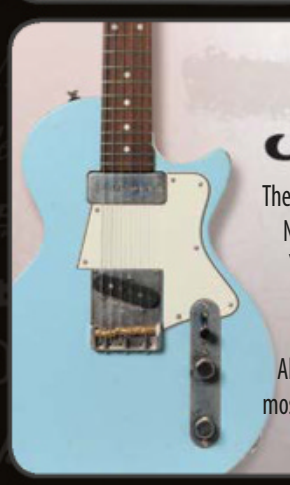

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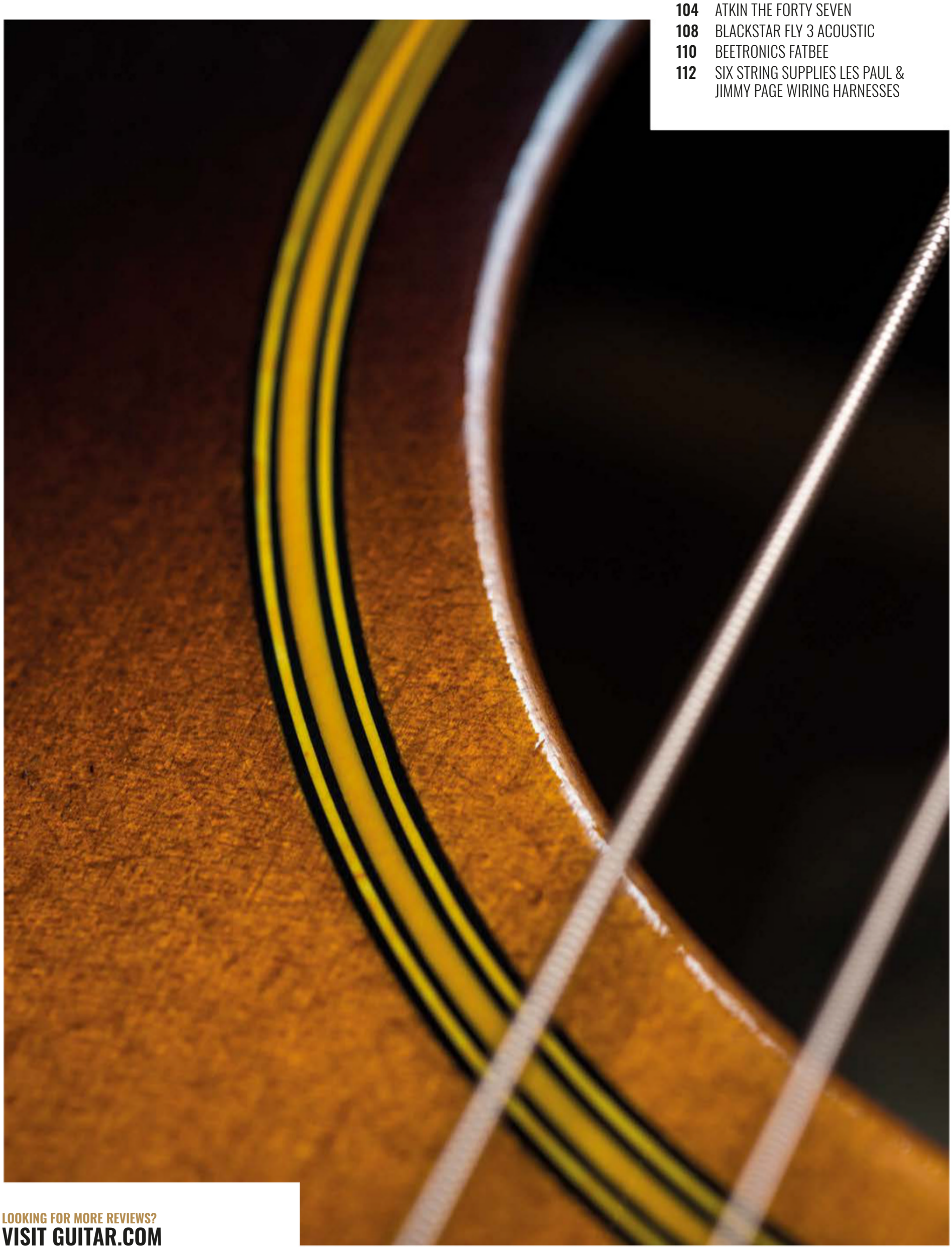

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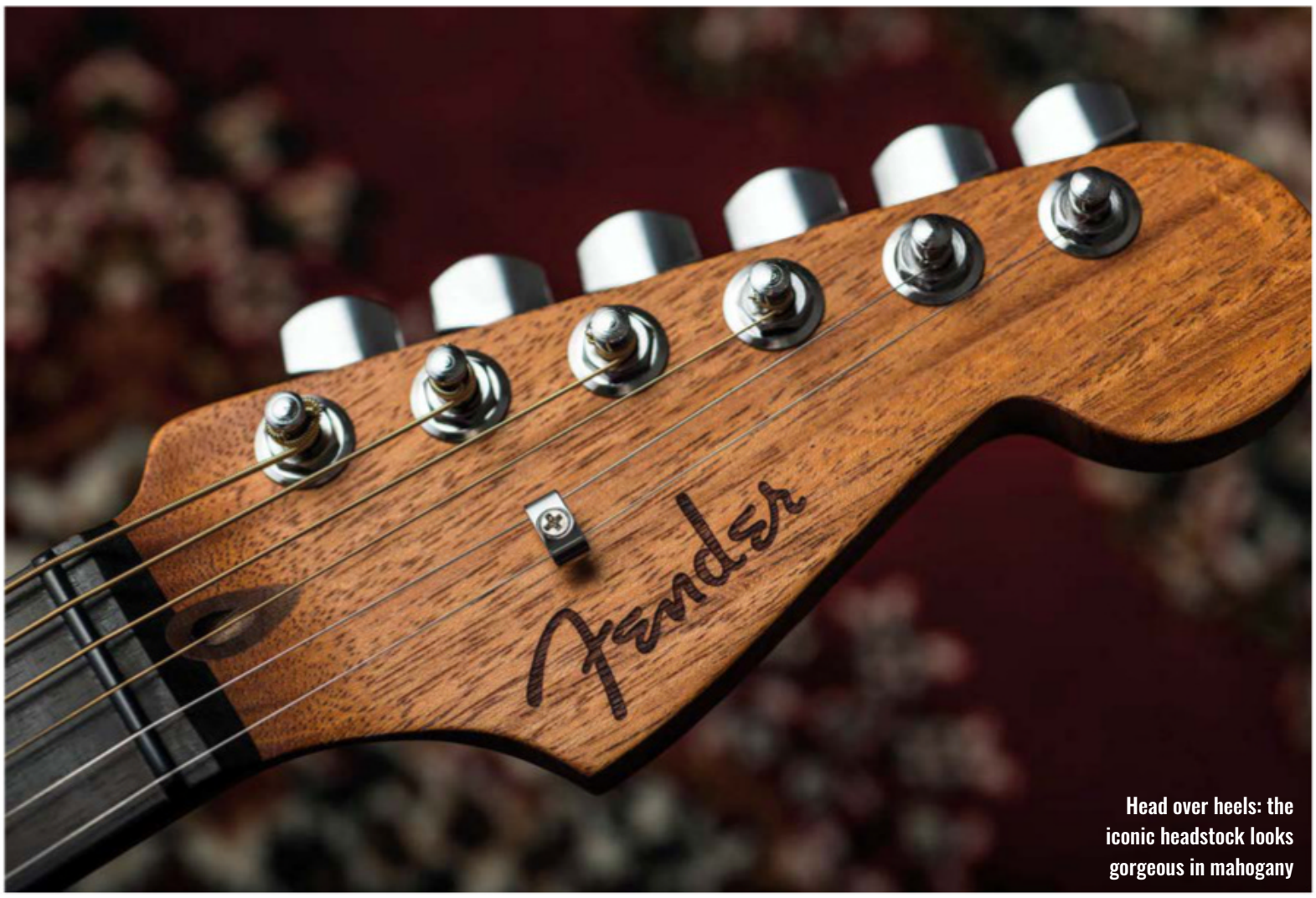
FENDER

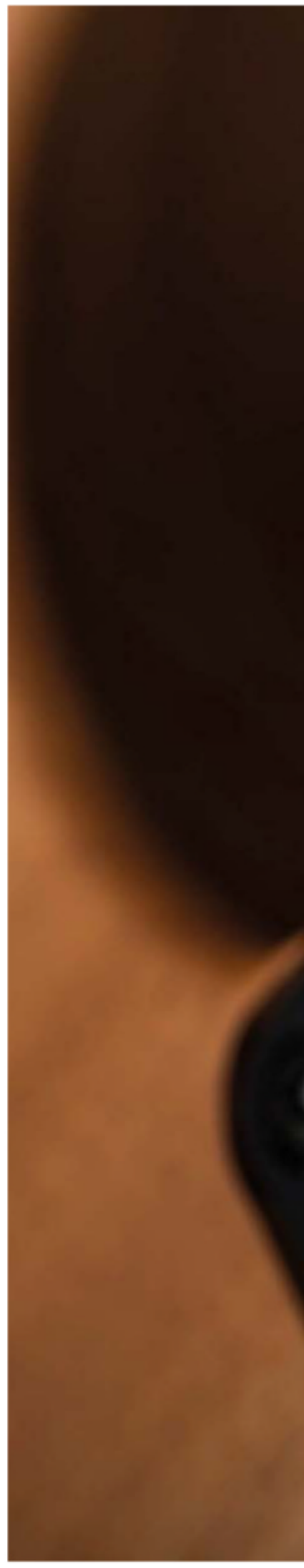
AMERICAN ACOUSTASONIC STRATOCASTER

WORDS MICHAEL WATTS

Fender has followed the Acoustasonic Telecaster with a double-cut version complete with a range of new sounds. Does this svelte hybrid raise the bar?



Head over heels: the iconic headstock looks gorgeous in mahogany



One of the many highlights of 2019's NAMM show was the launch of the American Acoustasonic Telecaster, a modernist design that proved a hit thanks to its combination of striking looks and performance geared towards the needs of the Instagram generation. Just as it did in the 1950s, following that oh-so-modern Telecaster is an even sleeker sibling.

Just like the Telecaster version, the American Acoustasonic Stratocaster has a hollow mahogany body routed from two centre-joined sections that act as a frame – including the round-edged forearm chamfer and belly-cut – into which a transverse-braced Sitka spruce top is set, with the finish and purfling printed rather than sprayed onto it. Then there's Fender's eye-catching patented Stringed Instrument Resonance System. This soundport extends into the body itself, an idea similar to the tornavoz that added depth to the sound of lightly built Antonio de Torres classical instruments of the 19th century.

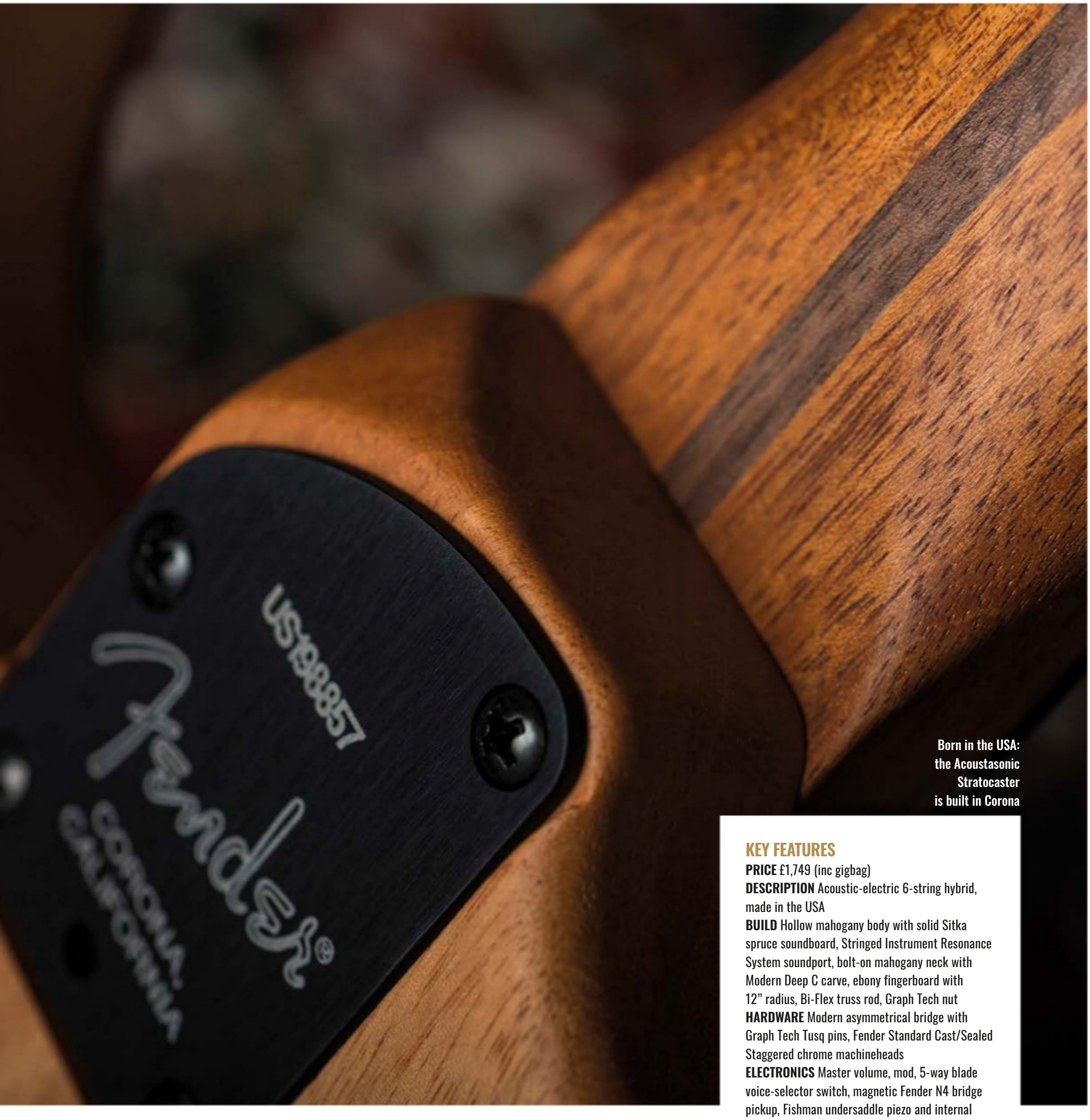
Fender describes the profile of the mahogany neck as a Modern Deep C, a neck carve that debuted with the American Professional series in 2017. It feels full in the hand, though the thin open-pore satin urethane finish will split opinions. The 12-inch fretboard radius is a world away from a vintage Strat's 7.25 inches, as is the ebony extension that allows for a 22nd fret.

The solidbody Stratocaster design is loved for its triple-pickup configuration and, with this incarnation, we get a different take on that trifecta, with a Fishman under-saddle transducer and under-bridge body sensor, and an Acoustasonic Noiseless pickup at the bridge.

It's in the array of sonic options available that the Stratocaster differs most clearly from its Telecaster stablemate, with a variety of voices modelled on acoustic guitars and three more straightforward electric sounds. All the sounds are mono blends, so Y-cable stereo-blend shenanigans are strictly off limits.

Although it's quite comfortable against the body, the guitar is a little neck-heavy, doubtless due to the hollow construction in conjunction with the Strat's balance point.

The 0.011 gauge acoustic strings coupled with the relatively slim neck width make for a playing experience that is neither acoustic nor electric – dedicated acoustic fingerstylists may find the string spacing a little tight, especially in deep open tunings, while electric players may find the prospect of a wound G unnerving. Having said that, Tyler Bryant and Daniel Donato's blistering performance at NAMM 2020 was proof that it's entirely possible to shred on this if you so wish.



Born in the USA: the Acoustasonic Stratocaster is built in Corona

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £1,749 (inc gigbag)
DESCRIPTION Acoustic-electric 6-string hybrid, made in the USA
BUILD Hollow mahogany body with solid Sitka spruce soundboard, Stringed Instrument Resonance System soundport, bolt-on mahogany neck with Modern Deep C carve, ebony fingerboard with 12" radius, Bi-Flex truss rod, Graph Tech nut
HARDWARE Modern asymmetrical bridge with Graph Tech Tusq pins, Fender Standard Cast/Sealed Staggered chrome machineheads
ELECTRONICS Master volume, mod, 5-way blade voice-selector switch, magnetic Fender N4 bridge pickup, Fishman undersaddle piezo and internal body sensor
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 42.86mm at nut, 51.2mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20.4mm at first fret, 23.7mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 37mm at nut, 54.9mm at bridge
WEIGHT 2.39kg/5.3lb
FINISH Polyester satin matt body finish, natural satin urethane neck finish. Available in Dakota Red (as reviewed), 3-Colour Sunburst, Black, Natural, Transparent Sonic Blue
LEFT-HANDERS No
CONTACT fender.com

IN USE

The Acoustasonic Stratocaster features 10 voices. What looks like a tone control is in fact a 'mod' knob that allows you to blend between the twin sounds on offer in each position on the five-way blade selector. Such a wealth of variety is only viable with active electronics and the guitar has a rechargeable battery system that draws power via a mini USB in the output jack. Reassuringly, the volume knob has been shifted to sit where a Strat player would expect to find it.

Our first dilemma when unleashing the guitar from its rugged, commuter-friendly gigbag is what to plug it into. We experiment with a variety of options, including dedicated acoustic amps, valve combos, and direct into PA systems, and it's the latter with which we feel the instrument works best.

In position five, where you would usually find a Stratocaster's neck pickup, you get 'core acoustics', with a choice between sounds modelled on those of a chunky mahogany dreadnought or a rosewood concert model.

FINGERPICKIN' GOOD

The Acoustasonic's broad crossover appeal has already seen it taken up by some big-name artists. We catch up with award-winning guitarist Molly Tuttle to find out why it speaks to her

Fender's 2020 artist roster is a dizzying array of talent from both the acoustic and electric scenes. Nashville singer-songwriter Molly Tuttle has been using her extraordinary command of clawhammer and cross-picking to explore new textures with the American Acoustasonic Strat.

"I have had a fun time playing my Acoustasonic Strat," she says. "I can plug it straight into my amp and easily switch between clean acoustic and electric tones. I'm looking forward to taking it on the road once I can go back on tour.

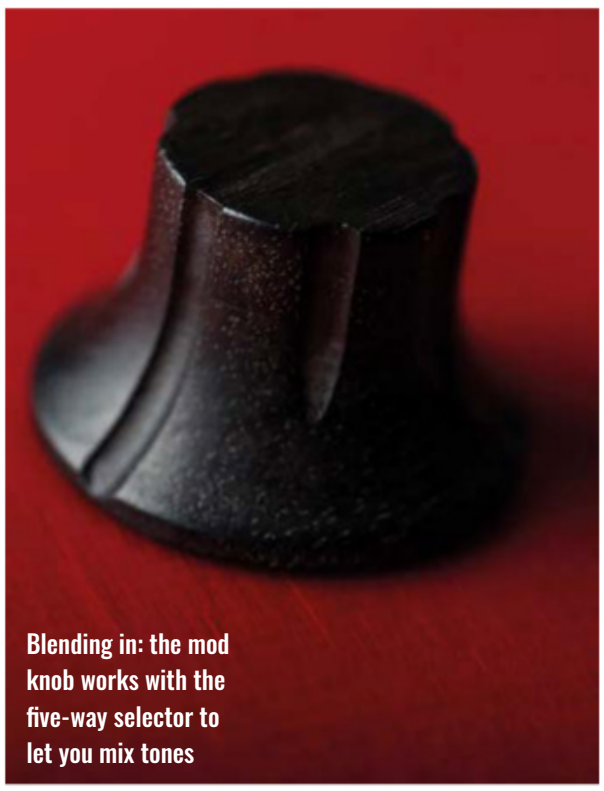
"For me this guitar is perfect for when I want to add another dimension to my set by changing my tone and dynamics, or when I'm sitting in with electric bands and want to be heard loud and clear with no fuss. It sounds fantastic. It's especially great for live settings. Let's say you're taking a solo and midway through you want to build the dynamics by switching from an acoustic to an electric tone – what other guitar can do that?"

Find out more at mollytuttlemusic.com

Neck deep: the comfortable neck profile is a Modern Deep C

Grain of truth: the hollow mahogany body supports a transverse-braced Sitka spruce top

All the right noises: The bridge has a compensated saddle and Tusq pins



Blending in: the mod knob works with the five-way selector to let you mix tones

Suits you, SIRS: Fender's patented Stringed Instrument Resonance System

Both of these modelled voices work well for strumming – the clear, fundamental mahogany dread and rich complex voice of the 12-fret slot-headstock concert model offering a lot to work with.

Position four is for 'alternative' acoustics and features a small-body walnut guitar – dial this in for a shot of Ed Sheeran – and an Americana-style mahogany dreadnought for a dry, woody fingerstyle voice.

Position three unleashes percussion and enhanced harmonics with a rosewood auditorium voice. This time, the mod knob blends in the body pickup, so you can get your Hedges vibe on – that's Michael, not Benson and – with taps on the bridge and body. We find that, in practice, the 'bass drum' effect on the soundboard could still use a touch of compression to tighten it.

The body 'snare' and 'tom' sounds are also a little muted compared to a full-size acoustic instrument but they're definitely usable – just add a loop pedal for days of fun.

Up until this point, the modelled guitars have all had Sitka spruce tops. Position two, however, is an acoustic-electric blend between a rosewood dreadnought with an Engelmann spruce top and a clean single-coil sound. This is the only position that offers an acoustic-single-coil blend, and results in some enthralling textures.

The acoustic sounds are unavoidably 'plugged-in', with a hint of piezo sizzle throughout the trebles. They're no less convincing than your average undersaddle-equipped acoustic though, and are better than many we've heard. The quality and variety of the voices is impressive, with some evocative sounds, especially when the body sensor is brought into play.

The bridge position blends between a fat single-coil sound and an overdriven tone. Yes, you read that right. Given Fender's pedigree, it should come as a surprise to absolutely nobody that the electric sounds are excellent, and supply all the finesse and grit you might expect from a Stratocaster. The overdriven bridge pickup sound is impressive too but many Strat fans will miss those neck and middle pickups.

Over the past couple of decades, the guitar market has become haunted with the ghosts of well-meaning attempts to merge the acoustic and electric worlds. Few have had as much potential to endure as this. The American Acoustasonic Stratocaster is not intended as a replacement for your D-45, Olson SJ or indeed your electric Stratocaster. Instead, it encourages you to think differently about the music and sounds you make.

8/10 **A sleek guitar with which to bust out of those familiar boxes and try something new**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Relish Mary One **€3,799**, Taylor T5z Classic **£2,220**, Godin LGXT **£1,699**

PRS

SE STARLA STOPTAIL & SE MIRA

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

The Maryland company's retro-inspired Mira and Starla models have arrived in their most affordable incarnations yet. Time to take the plunge?

Head first: the Mira model debuted in 2007

Lower the tone: both models have master volume and tone knobs

Bold as brass: the Mira has a wraparound bridge with adjustable brass saddles

Paul Reed Smith built his reputation on relentless innovation and luxurious electric guitars with breathtaking figured tops. However, with the introduction of the Joe Knaggs-designed Mira in 2007, PRS began applying its not inconsiderable expertise to models with more stripped-back aesthetics, with the similarly retro Starla following in 2008.

After a year out of production, the models recently moved from the Maryland-built S2 line into the SE section of the PRS catalogue, which means they're being made outside the US for the first time, in Indonesia. As a result, they've dropped in price to a tempting £599.

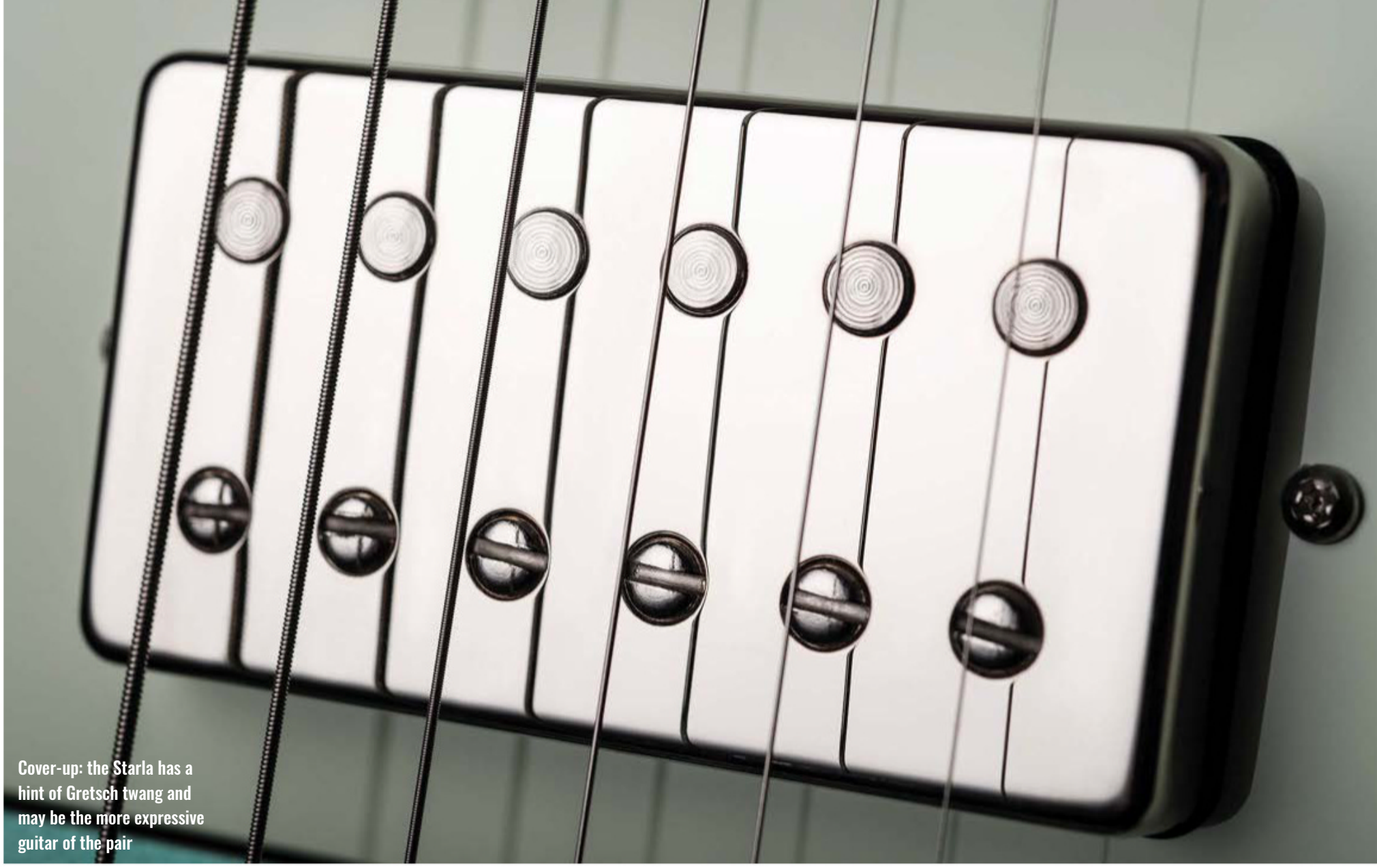
Point of origin aside, the specifications of both these guitars remain close to those of their S2 predecessors, although the Starla has sadly lost its Bigsby tailpiece. If the build quality is up to the brand's usual standards, however, we could have a couple of wallet-friendly wonders on our hands.

With that Bigsby out of the picture (did we mention how upset we are about that?) the Mira and Starla have more in common than ever. However, there are still enough differences to ensure you have a genuine choice to make between the two, beyond simply selecting your preferred body shape.

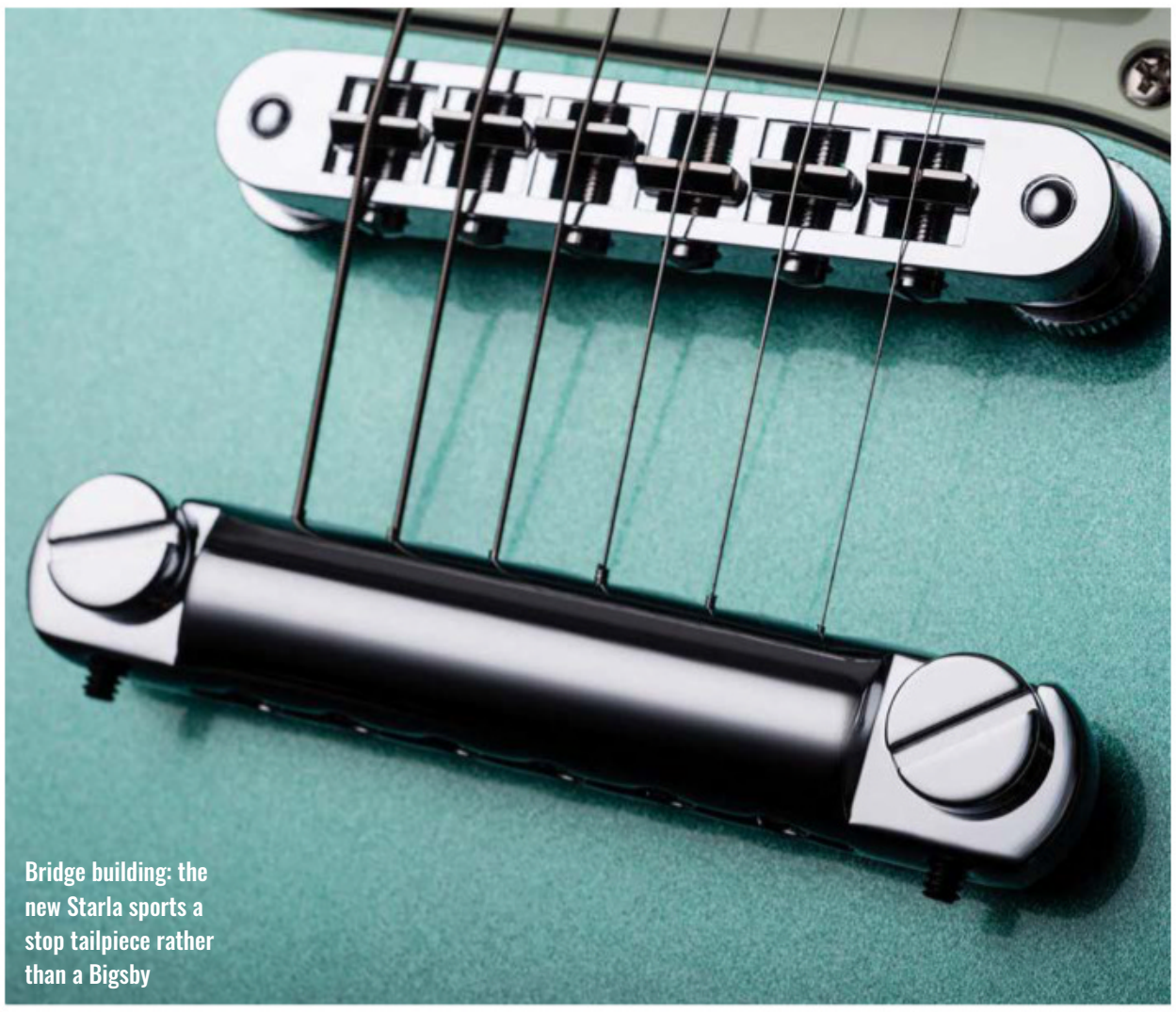
First, let's look at the similarities: both guitars have mahogany bodies and set necks with rosewood fretboards and PRS's usual 25-inch scale length. Both also have twin humbuckers with a coil-split engaged by pulling up the master tone control. And both offer a zingy metallic colour alongside a less ostentatious option: for the Mira, it's the sparkly Frost Blue Metallic seen here, or solid black with a tortoiseshell guard; for the Starla, it's this dreamily aquatic Metallic Green or a classic Antique White, again with a tortoiseshell guard.

The contrast in shapes is significant: the Starla's single-cut design means it has a different neck join, which will have an impact on tone, feel, and balance. But perhaps more important than that are the pickups. We're told the Mira's 85/15 S humbuckers are all about vintage rock punch, while the Starla's covered DS-02 'buckers look a lot like the somewhat Gretsch-flavoured units in Starlas of old.

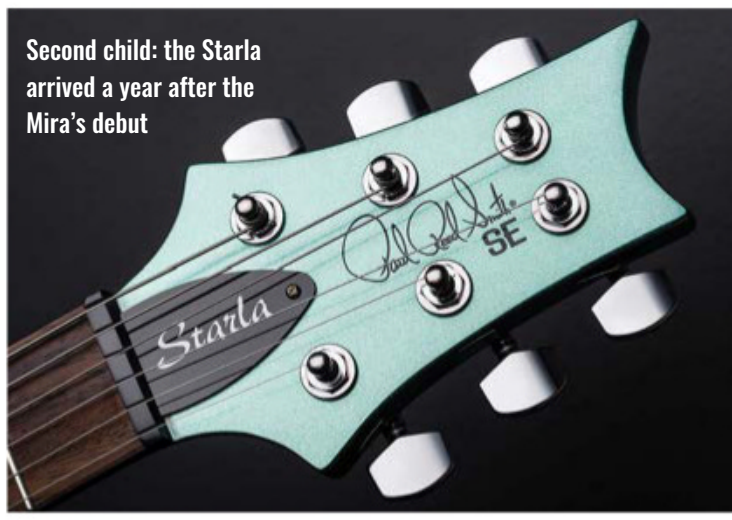
The bridges are different too. The Mira gets a chunky one-piece wraparound with individually adjustable brass saddles, while the Starla trades in the Bigsby (sniff!) for a tune-o-matic and stoptail.



Cover-up: the Starla has a hint of Gretsch twang and may be the more expressive guitar of the pair



Bridge building: the new Starla sports a stop tailpiece rather than a Bigsby



Second child: the Starla arrived a year after the Mira's debut

Both fretboards have a 10-inch radius and the familiar bird inlays but the necks themselves differ: the Mira's profile is Wide Thin, the Starla's Wide Fat. While both necks have the width to allow plenty of space for chubby fingers, the Starla's is 1.5mm deeper at the first fret. It might not seem like a lot but it definitely feels it.

Does the attention to detail live up to USA S2 standards? Not quite. The button of our Starla's low-E tuner only misses the side of the headstock by about a millimetre, which isn't technically a flaw but is hardly reassuring. More seriously, our Mira's pickup switch starts playing up after just a few days.

IN USE

Of course, the most important aspect of an instrument's build quality is how it affects playability – and that's where PRS has clearly been focusing its attention; both guitars are as easy to get stuck in to as a bowl of fresh pasta. Which neck profile you prefer is down to personal taste, but each feels slick in its own way, with tidy fretting and low factory actions.

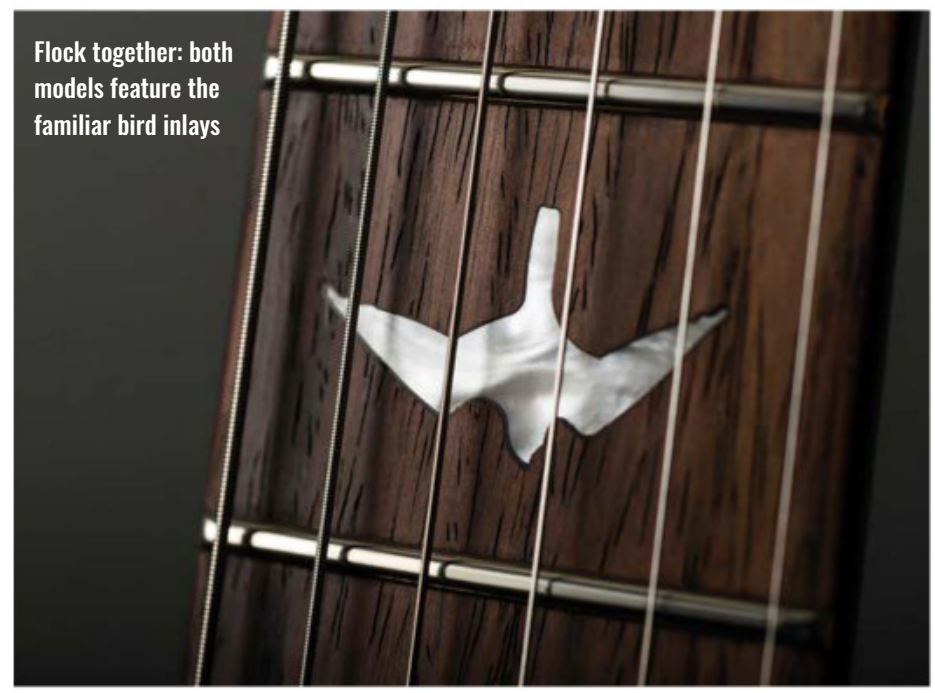
Our Mira is exceptionally light, which may or may not explain why its acoustic tone is so downright loud. It's more about honky mids than zingy treble, though, and that remains the case when we plug in. The DC resistance readings don't suggest especially hot pickups but these humbuckers belt it out way louder than the PAF types in our reference Les Paul.

There's plenty of upper-midrange snarl on the bridge pickup, making this a sensible choice for staccato rock riffing and big lead lines with that quintessential PRS clarity. The downside is that, while the neck pickup also presents an impressively full frequency range, there's not a lot of clucky sweetness in the middle position – at least, not until we pull out that tone knob.

Inevitably, you lose some lower-midrange fullness in single-coil mode but what you get in its place is a striking amount of phasey quack – not as much as a Stratocaster in one of its in-between settings but not far off.

Deep cut: both guitars have rosewood fretboards but the Starla's neck is 1.5mm deeper at the first fret

Punch it: the Mira's humbuckers deliver zesty rock tones



Flock together: both models feature the familiar bird inlays

Strangely enough, that's true even with only a single pickup selected.

That's a triple bonus of top-class Strat-style sounds to choose from, then, and their close equivalents are also available from the Starla. In fact, pretty much everything the single-cut model does echoes the qualities of its sibling, only with a voice that's slightly smoother and less cutting.

That makes the Starla less of a natural rock model than the Mira, but it responds better to gentle playing and some might find it a more expressive guitar. It has a little bit of Gretsch twang too. If only there were some way to accentuate that with downward note bends, perhaps by pushing down on a metal bar of some kind?

The tonal differences between the Mira and Starla are hardly substantial. If we had to choose a favourite, we'd be thinking more about their neck profiles than anything sonic. What's beyond debate, though, is that they're both technically fine guitars. Are these PRS guitars for people who don't think they like PRS guitars? If you've always had a secret yearning for one of the brand's cheekier models, this might be the best possible time to indulge it.

KEY FEATURES

SE MIRA
PRICE £599 (inc gigbag)
DESCRIPTION 6-string solidbody electric guitar, made in Indonesia
BUILD Double-cutaway mahogany body, set mahogany neck with 10" radius rosewood fingerboard, bird inlays, 22 medium-jumbo frets and synthetic nut
HARDWARE Adjustable one-piece bridge with brass saddles, sealed tuners
ELECTRONICS 2x 85/15 S humbucking pickups, master volume and tone, three-way pickup-selector switch, coil-split on tone control
SCALE LENGTH 25"/635mm
NECK WIDTH 43.1mm at nut, 52.6mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20.4mm at first fret, 23.6mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 36mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
WEIGHT 2.9kg/6.4lb
FINISH Frost Blue Metallic (as reviewed), Black
LEFT-HANDERS No

8/10 **It's about as punk rock as PRS gets but this little rebel has some hidden single-coil talents**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Reverend Contender HB **£799**, Epiphone SG Standard **£399**, ESP LTD Viper-400 **£896**

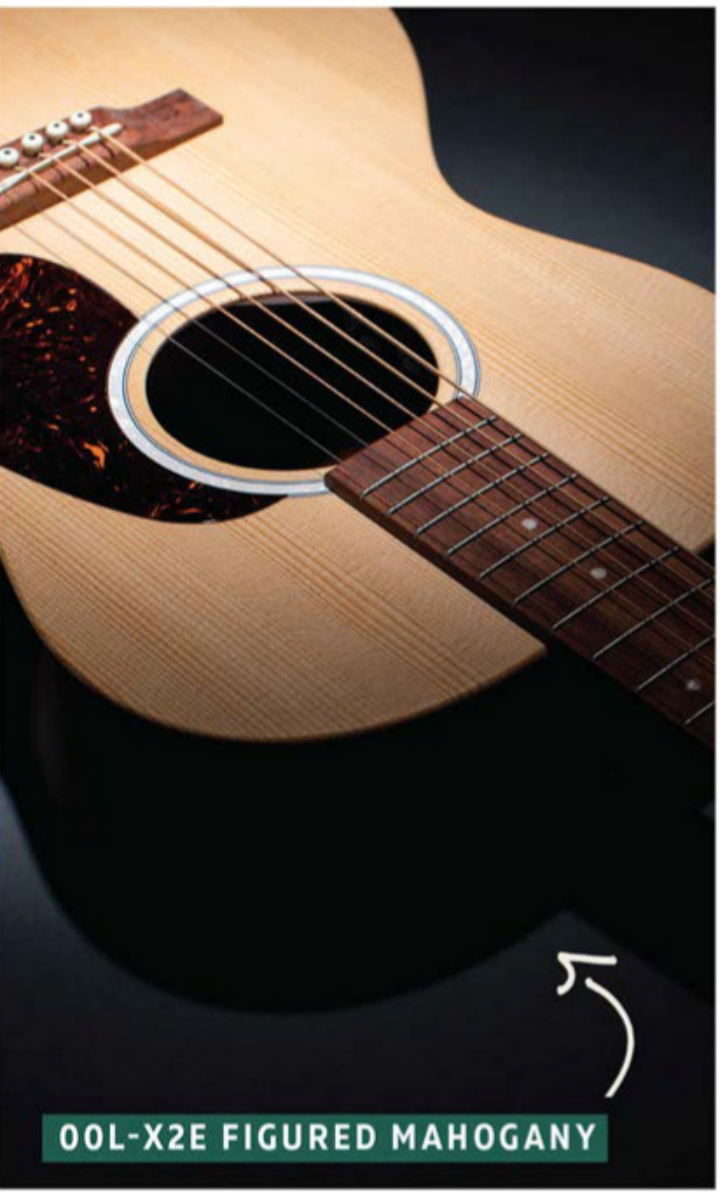
KEY FEATURES

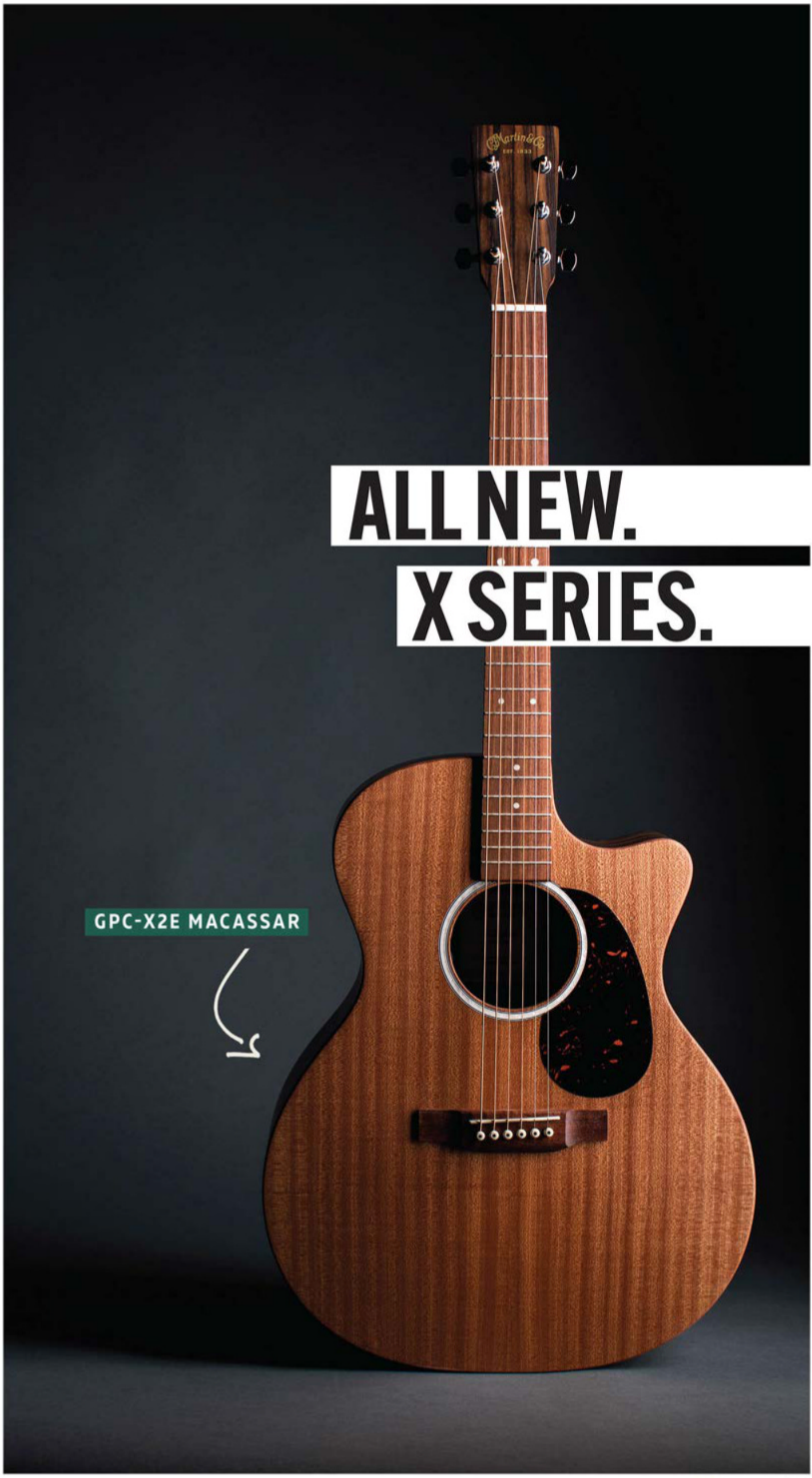
SE STARLA STOPTAIL
PRICE £599 (inc gigbag)
DESCRIPTION 6-string solidbody electric guitar, made in Indonesia
BUILD Single-cutaway mahogany body, set mahogany neck with 10" radius rosewood fingerboard, bird inlays, 22 medium-jumbo frets and synthetic nut
HARDWARE Tune-o-matic bridge and stoptail, sealed tuners
ELECTRONICS 2x DS-02 humbucking pickups, master volume and tone, three-way pickup-selector switch, coil-split on tone control
SCALE LENGTH 25"/635mm
NECK WIDTH 43.3mm at nut, 52.9mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21.9mm at first fret, 24.4mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 36mm at nut, 51mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.0kg/6.6lb
FINISH Metallic Green (as reviewed), Antique White
LEFT-HANDERS No
CONTACT prsguitars.com

8/10 **A slightly more sophisticated alternative to the SE Mira but at the same bargain price**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Godin Summit Classic **£599**, Yamaha Revstar RS502 **£776**, Fender Player Lead III **£599**





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GRETSCH

G6129T PLAYERS EDITION JET FT

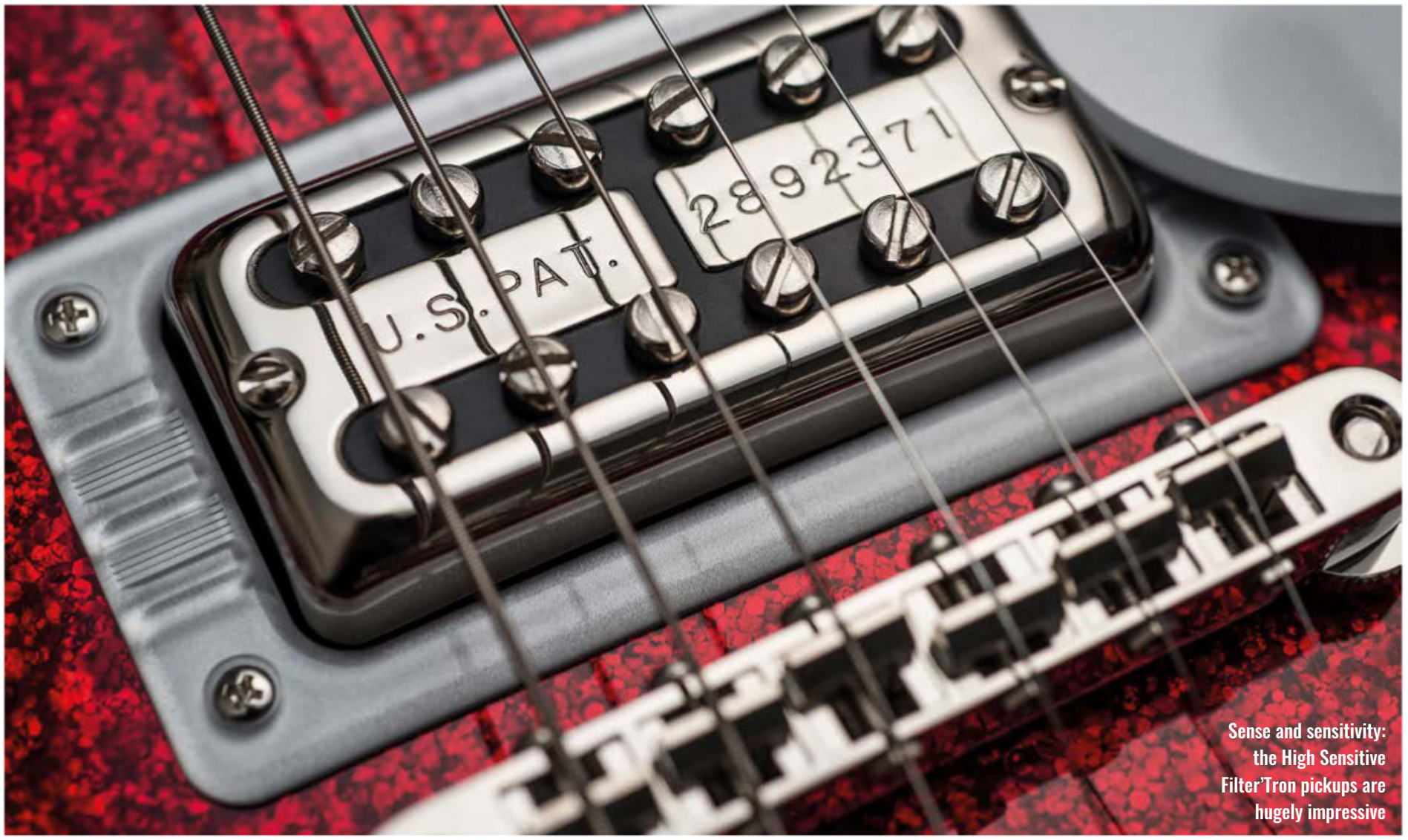
Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

WORDS HUW PRICE

In the mid-1950s, Gibson clung to its jazz heritage while Fender looked to the future and Gretsch began covering miniaturised archtops in glitter. Now, the Players Edition Jet FT is bringing those sparkling 1950s stylings bang up to date

As a drum manufacturer, Gretsch perfected the art of wrapping sparkly plastic around curved wood. But in a world in which the tonal properties of timber and adhesives are endlessly debated, gluing fabric-backed nitron sheets onto the bodies of beautiful guitars is surely not a recipe for resonance. However, it doesn't appear to do any harm here, as we will discover shortly.

Introduced in 2016, the Players Edition line is the result of some smart thinking. Its guitars may have a fantastic vintage flavour but if you look closer, it becomes clear that Gretsch has added some contemporary refinements designed to make these instruments road-ready for performing artists. Here, an Adjusto-Matic bridge sits on threaded posts fixed into the body, while a set of Gotoh locking tuners graces the bound headstock. There's also a no-load master tone pot with a Squeezebox paper-in-oil capacitor, and a treble bleed circuit on the master volume.



Sense and sensitivity: the High Sensitive Filter'Tron pickups are hugely impressive

Brought to heel: the lower neck set, rolled cutaway and tapered heel make this Jet a much more comfortable ride than a vintage example

Less obvious is the streamlined maple-capped mahogany body, with its modern chambering pattern and depth reduced from 51mm to 47mm. The corner of the cutaway has been softened, and the heel is tapered to provide better upper-fret access than you'd get on a vintage-spec Jet.

The master volume and tone controls combine with individual volume controls for each pickup and a three-way selector switch. It's a clever layout, allowing you to approach it like a Telecaster player,

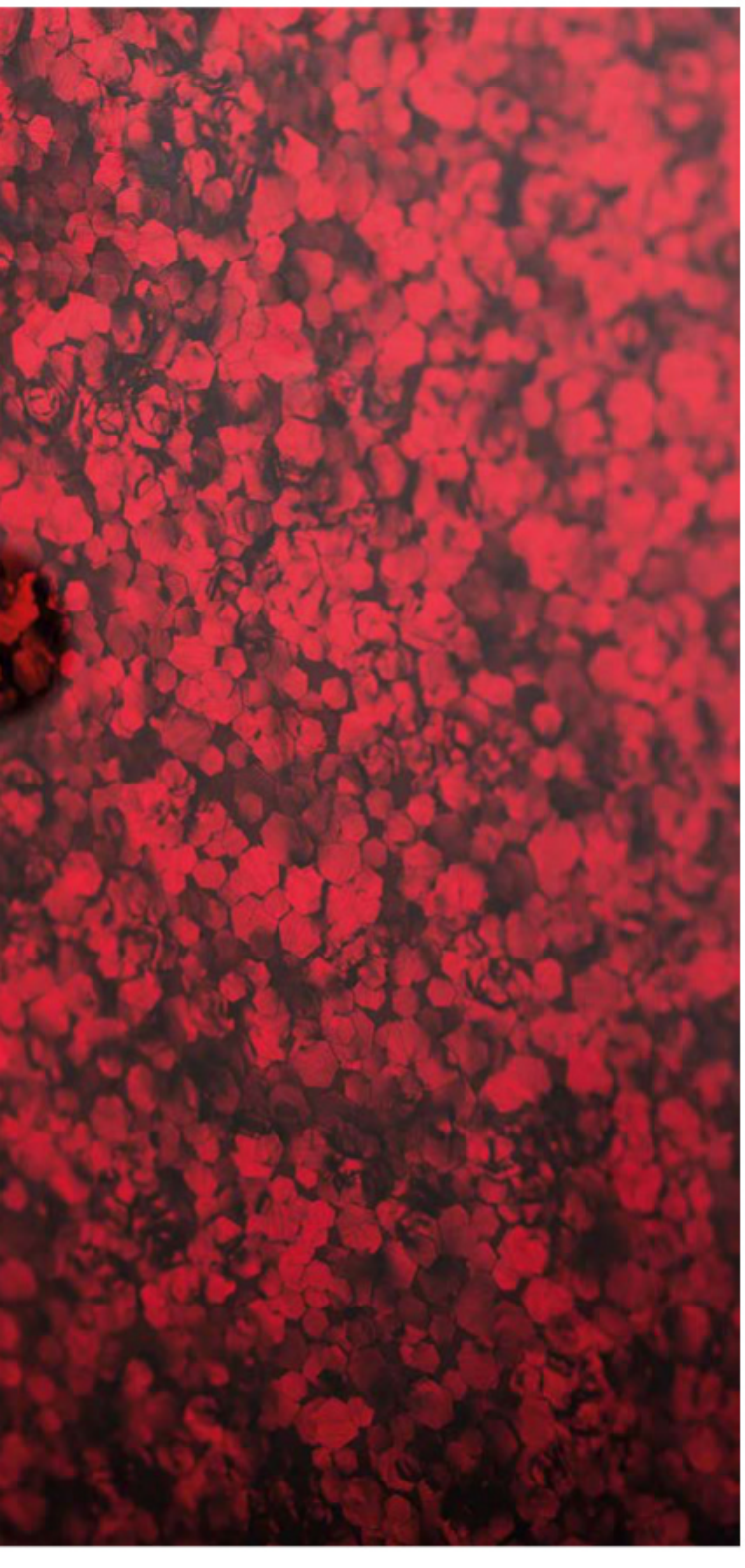
KEY FEATURES

PRICE £2,049 (inc hard case)
DESCRIPTION 6-string electric guitar, made in Japan
BUILD Chambered mahogany body with arched laminated maple top, set one-piece mahogany neck, bound 12-inch radius rosewood fretboard, pearloid Neo-Classic thumbnail inlays, 22 medium-jumbo frets, synthetic bone nut
HARDWARE Anchored Adjusto-Matic bridge, Bigsby B7CP String-Thru tailpiece, Gotoh locking tuners
ELECTRONICS 2x High Sensitive Filter'Tron humbucking pickups, master volume and master tone controls, individual pickup volume controls, 3-way pickup selector
SCALE LENGTH 24.6"/625mm
NECK WIDTH 42.7mm at nut, 52.2mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21.2mm at first fret, 23.3mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.7mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.69kg/8.13lb
FINISH Red Sparkle (as reviewed), Silver Sparkle
LEFT-HANDERS No
CONTACT gretschguitars.com

All that glitters: the depth of the Red Sparkle finish is spectacular under stage lighting

Abalone ranger: the headstock logo is another touch of bling

Take control: Gretsch first used G-Arrow knobs between 1957-67



Fine-tuned: the bound headstock features Gotoh locking tuners

using only the master controls and ignoring the individual volumes, or explore Les Paul-style blending options and ignore the master.

The pickups are High Sensitive Filter'Tron humbuckers, while all your wobble needs are catered for by a Bigsby B7CP tailpiece sporting a String-Thru roller bar – a real time-saver during string changes. The Red Sparkle top looks amazing and we're quite taken with the brown-stained mahogany body and one-piece mahogany neck.

IN USE

Any concerns about neck-dive are quickly dispelled because the Bigsby maintains a good balance. The slim and fast-feeling U-shaped neck has a bound rosewood 'board with 22 fairly low medium-jumbo frets that look and feel fantastic. The unplugged tones are loud and discernibly semi-hollow but have the sort of sustain you'd expect from an ES-335.

It's an encouraging start and the merrymaking only increases when we plug in. These pickups are louder and more crisply defined than the vintage Filter'Trons in our 6120 conversion. The output is on a par with early-1950s P-90s and yet they are unmistakably Filter'Tron in tone.

Played clean, the bridge has a squeaky bite and the neck has a rounded jazziness. In the middle position, the midrange scoops out to produce a phasey quack that rolling back the neck pickup's volume control accentuates nicely. Step on a dirtbox and the G6129T snarls, growls and sings almost like a P-90 Goldtop, only with more chime, brightness and twang.

Those of you with vintage predilections may find yourselves craving a slightly fatter neck and lightweight tuners, but this guitar's subtly updated pickups, massive tonal depth, comfortable ride and fabulous build quality make it one of the best Jets ever.

9/10 **All the charm and sparkle of a vintage Jet but without quirks or comprises**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

TV Jones Spectra Sonic Supreme **£2,295**, Duesenberg Starplayer TV **£2,199**, PRS S2 Starla **(used)**

ATKIN GUITARS
THE FORTY SEVEN

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

WORDS HUW PRICE

Alister Atkin's sultry Slope Shoulder series of Gibson-inspired flat-top acoustics includes this achingly authentic yet updated take on the LG-2. But does it sound as good as it looks?

When they were introduced in 1942, the LG models were Gibson's entry-level acoustics. As was typical of Gibson's student models, they may have been less adorned but that didn't mean they were lesser instruments than the pricier J-45, J-200 and so forth.

It doesn't seem that long since LGs were a relatively cheap and extremely cheerful entry point into the world of vintage Gibson acoustics. Sadly, that's no longer the case. Thankfully, there's an affordable alternative made in the English city of Canterbury rather than Kalamazoo, Michigan.

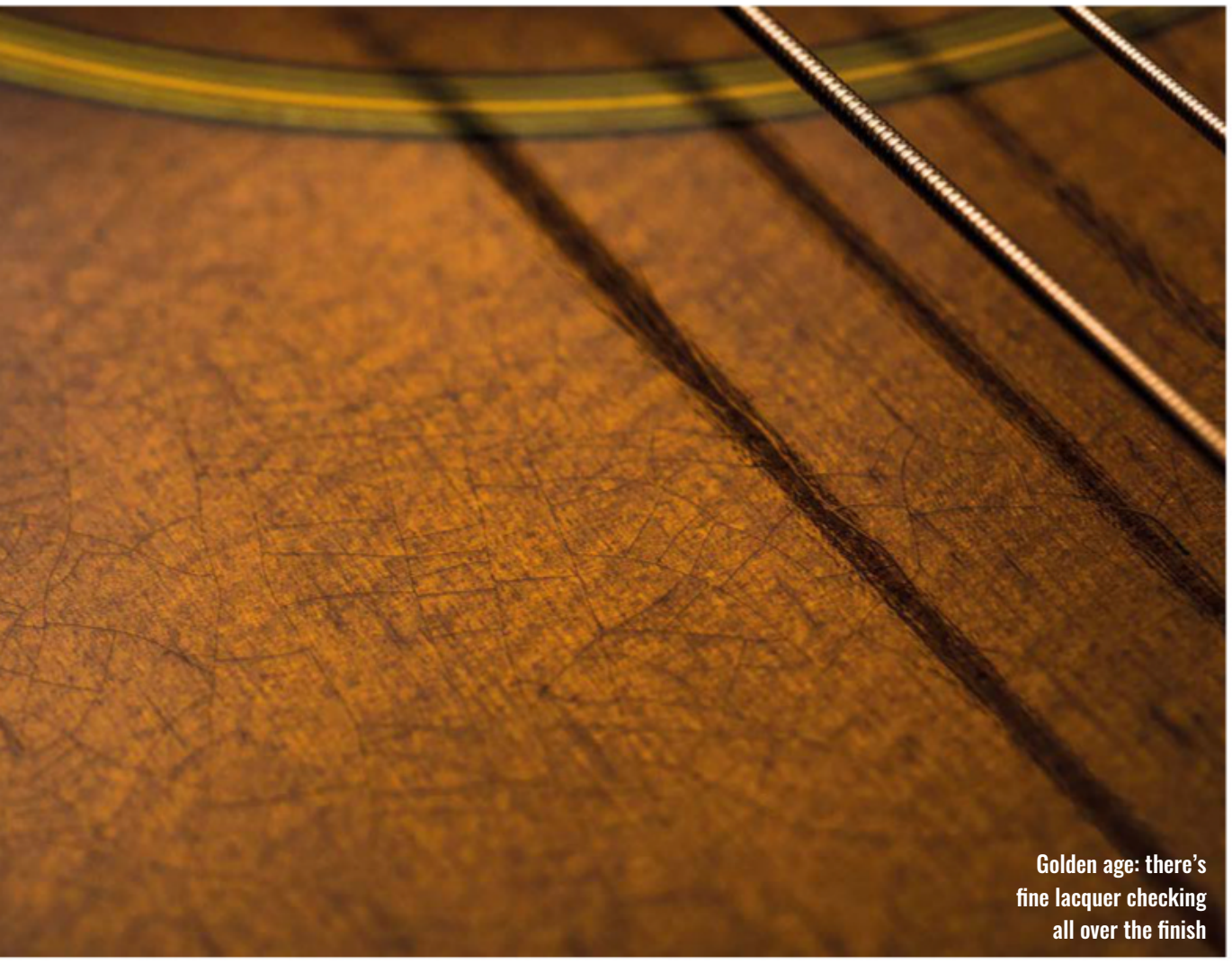
We tested Atkin's The Forty Three in 2017 and awarded it a rare perfect 10. That guitar was based on a banner headstock J-45, and this little beauty is modelled after an LG-2 from the same era. For the most part, the specifications are identical those of a vintage Gibson, with an X-braced Sitka spruce top, mahogany back and sides, and a mahogany neck set into the body at the 14th fret.

Points of difference include white plastic bridge pins rather than black, the headstock shape, a lack of pearl dots on the bridge, and a lower bout that's been widened to 14.5 inches. Gibson originals vary between 14.125 and 14.25 but we actually prefer the Atkin outline.

Here, the 19 frets and pearl dot inlays are set into a Santos rosewood (aka pau ferro) fretboard with a rectangular bridge to match. The guitar combines vintage-correct three-on-a-plate Kluson-style tuners with single-ply celluloid body binding, a bone nut, and a compensated bone saddle.

Atkin has spared no expense and gone all out when it comes to the finish. The tobacco sunburst looks absolutely vintage-authentic. Its amber-hued centre boasts a nutty darkness, with no hint of yellow, and the fade into the surrounding dark brown is sumptuously smooth. If this reviewer's 1956 ES-225 is anything to go by, Atkin's transition is arguably more refined than Gibson's once was.

The artificial ageing on this model is particularly interesting. There has been no attempt to dent or chip the finish, and the fingerboard and bridge have been buffed to a reflective sheen. The appearance of age has instead been created by allowing the lacquer to sink into the mahogany, and avoiding excessive gloss.



Golden age: there's fine lacquer checking all over the finish

Pin drop: the pau ferro bridge has an attractive grain

Smell the love: for our writer, the Atkin's aromas were nothing to turn your nose up at

Additionally, there's fine lacquer checking all over the finish. Although it's a touch too crazed and extensive to pass as the real deal in front of experienced eyes, it's attractive if you appreciate this sort of thing. The ageing attempts are more than skin-deep, however, extending to the baked soundboard and baked pre-war style scalloped braces.

IN USE

The Forty Seven is intoxicating on several levels – not least its smell. This reviewer could've spent much of the day with his nose inside the soundhole, giddy with the heady aromas of lacquer, glue and tonewood [Have you been spraying guitars with the windows closed again, Huw? – Ed]. It's certainly an area in which acoustics always win out over electrics.

In terms of aesthetics, the Atkin is clearly not a Gibson or indeed a vintage guitar but, much like spellbinding historic instruments, something about it just draws us in and compels us to pick it up and play.

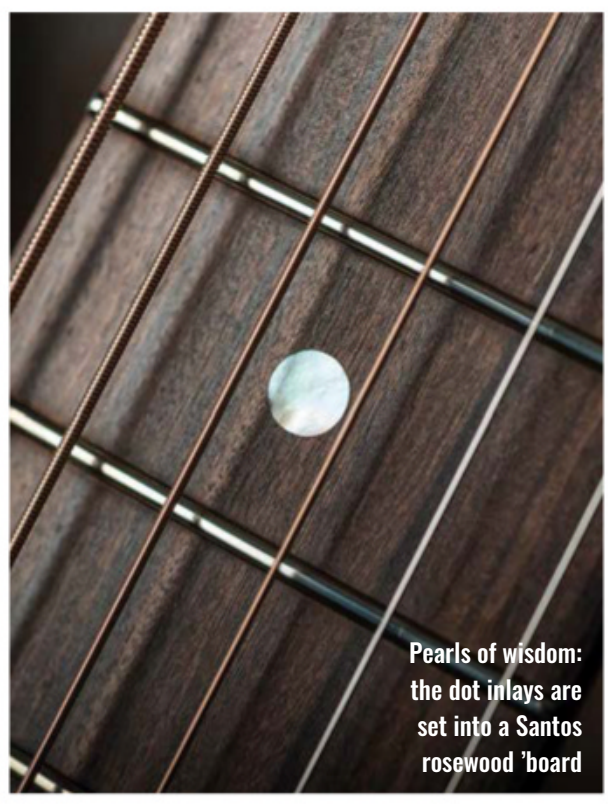
Despite the more modern neck profile, it even *feels* old. Part of that comes down to its size and light yet solid feel. While Atkin's standard C-profile neck is designed to be less of a handful than some of the huge necks of the pre-war and banner headstock eras, it's by no means skinny and is on the fuller side of what we'd consider to be medium depth.

The tone combines classic and modern elements. On the vintage side, you'll hear warm and effusive woodiness, a rounded bass thump, and the lingering ghostly harmonics that we listen for inside the body of old Gibson acoustics.

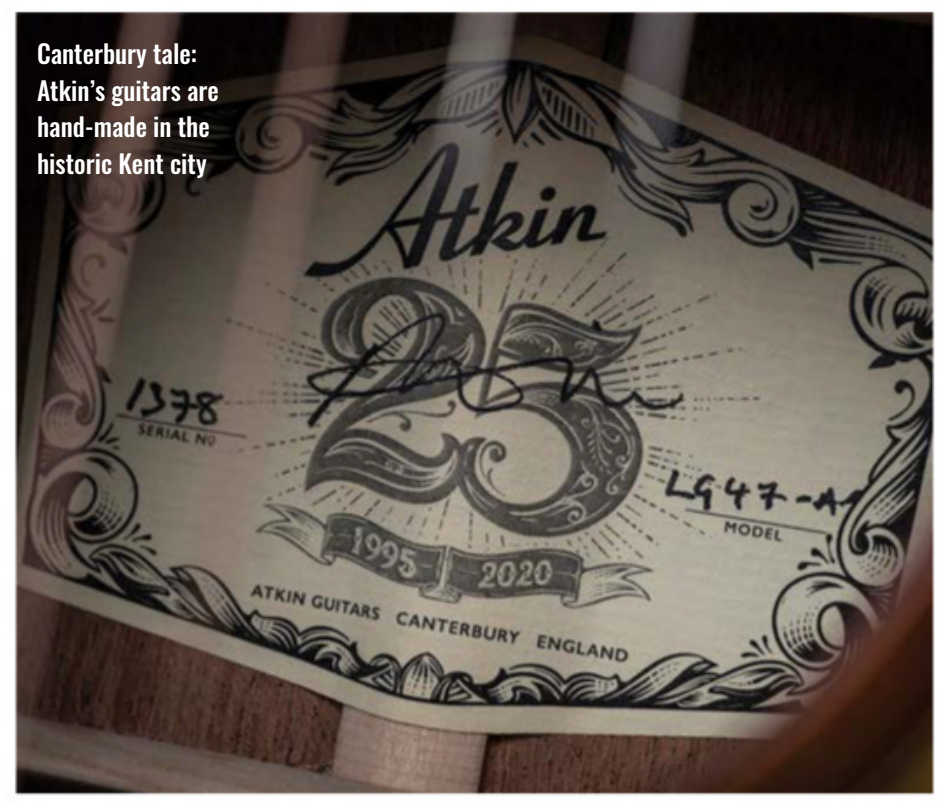
KEY FEATURES

PRICE £3,099 (inc hard case)
DESCRIPTION 6-string acoustic guitar, made in the UK
BUILD Solid baked Sitka spruce top with solid mahogany back and sides, mahogany neck, Santos rosewood (pau ferro) bridge and fingerboard, walnut peghead overlay, 14th-fret neck join, baked scalloped bracing, three-on-a-plate tuners, bone nut and saddle
SCALE LENGTH 631.52mm/24 7/8"
NECK WIDTH 43.3mm at nut, 54.6mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21.5mm at first fret, 22.7mm at 9th fret
STRING SPACING 36.9mm at nut, 55.7mm at bridge
WEIGHT 1.69kg/3.72lb
LEFT HANDERS Yes
FINISH Sunburst aged gloss nitrocellulose
CONTACT atkinguitars.com

Easy going: you'd be unlikely to find smooth machineheads and exemplary intonation on too many vintage instruments



Pearls of wisdom: the dot inlays are set into a Santos rosewood 'board



Canterbury tale: Atkin's guitars are hand-made in the historic Kent city

On the contemporary side, we get extremely even string-to-string balance, volume aplenty and a tonal consistency across the fretboard that isn't a given with vintage guitars. There's also real solidity and substance to single notes played on the plain strings, and the bass has more punch, depth and power than we would expect from a vintage LG-2.

It's this bass extension that makes this possibly the best all-rounder for a guitar of its size that we've encountered. Small-bodied Gibson-style acoustics are generally associated with fingerstyle, whether that's country or old-school blues picking. While the Atkin lends itself readily to those styles in standard and dropped tunings, the total absence of boxy midrange resonance allows it to venture into J-45 territory as a highly effective strumming guitar. There's also a quickness and willingness to respond that is less apparent with those vintage Gibsons that are more stiffly braced.

The review guitar is strung with Elixir phosphor bronze strings and, as much as we enjoy Elixirs for their tone and longevity, we can't help but wonder if The Forty Seven might sound even more vintage with a Monel set such as Martin's Retros. Finding the best strings for an acoustic guitar is akin to changing pickups on electrics, only much quicker and easily reversed. The results can be surprising – many guitarists get divorced more often than they change their string brand but we recommend experimenting.

There's a degree of cognitive dissonance here. Though the relic'ing is tastefully done, The Forty Seven is clearly a new instrument. Yet Atkin has done something few builders and manufacturers are able to: it makes you *feel* like you're playing an old guitar.

It's still easy to play though – the tuning is solid, the machineheads work faultlessly, and the intonation is exemplary. In a direct shootout, The Forty Seven might not sound exactly like a 1940s LG-2 but we suspect that Atkin's version may be more versatile as a result.

9/10 **Captures the vibe and visual allure of its vintage inspiration but achieves fuller, more balanced and more musically versatile tonal qualities**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Bourgeois Small Jumbo Ltd Custom AT **£4,250**, B&G Caletta Private Build **£4,699**, Gibson 1942 Banner LG-2 **£3,799**

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £99
DESCRIPTION Miniature solid-state acoustic amp with internal 3" speaker and extension cab
POWER RATING 3W (doubled with cab)
CONTROLS Volume, shape, bass, treble, echo level, echo time
CONNECTIONS MP3/line-in, headphone/speaker emulated line-out, extension speaker out, DC in
POWER 6x AA batteries (included) or mains
DIMENSIONS 170 x 128 x 102mm
CONTACT blackstaramps.com

BLACKSTAR

FLY 3 ACOUSTIC STEREO PACK

WORDS MICHAEL WATTS

When Blackstar launched its game-changing micro-amp in 2014, it quickly created a buzz. Will the acoustic version do for the unplugged brigade what its predecessor did for electric players?

Released in the twilight of 2014, Blackstar's original Fly 3 was the exception to the rule that all battery-powered micro-amps sound like punch-drunk wasps. With the addition of the Fly 3 Acoustic, the line now caters for singer-songwriters and fingerstyle players too, as well as ukuleles and mandolins.

The Fly 3 Acoustic Stereo Pack is made up of a tiny solid-state amp with an equally bijou extension cabinet, both of which are equipped with three-inch speakers. Plugging in the cab doubles the output to a stonking six watts, sculpted by volume, bass, treble and echo knobs. There are two preset EQs available via the shape button, plus a headphone-out and an MP3/line-in.

IN USE

Assembling the frankly adorable stereo setup on our desk and plugging in a guitar equipped with a K&K transducer, we're greeted with an impressively capable and warmly received sound for open-chord work. The tiny speakers even handle drop tunings as far as DADGAD with a lively and engaging response. As a bit of extra oomph with onboard ambience under the acoustic sound, it could make intimate 'unplugged' gigs a lot more fun.

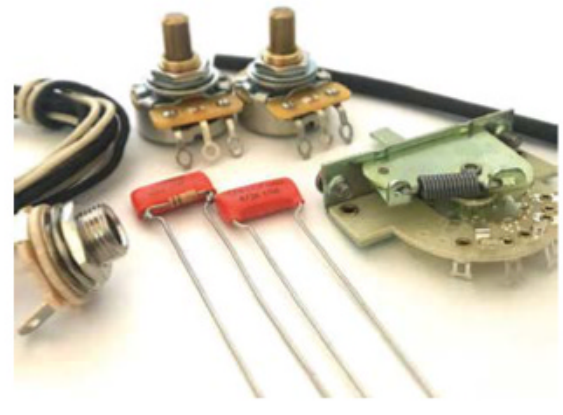
Nylon-string guitars, ukuleles and charangos all work beautifully and the EQ, although basic, makes a difference. The shape button is a welcome touch too. The only thing that proves too much for the drivers is the double bass on a backing track, but that's a common complaint with amps many times this size. While it won't replace your main rig, the Fly 3 Acoustic is a nice addition for home use and Lilliputian venues.

8/10 **More like a tiny PA than an acoustic amp, the Fly 3 will boost your output politely and with style**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Roland Mobile Cube **£119**, Fender Acoustasonic 15 **£89**, Ibanez Troubadour T15II **£109**

The Art of Guitar Wiring...



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SIX STRING SUPPLIES

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BEETRONICS
FATBEE

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

We're all abuzz about the newest member of the Beetronics hive, whose meaty tones and wide gain range belie its tiny dimensions

Bees are small but Beetronics pedals are big. To redress this metaphysical imbalance of the cosmos, the Californian company has launched its Babee series of scaled-down stompers, starting with this JFET overdrive.

We're promised the same level of thick honeyed drive we've come to know and love from such pedals as the Overhive and Royal Jelly but presented in a format that's less likely to spark protests from the other occupants of your pedalboard. It's not properly miniature but it's smaller than a standard Boss compact and, despite the metal enclosure and the connotations that come with its name, feels almost weightless.

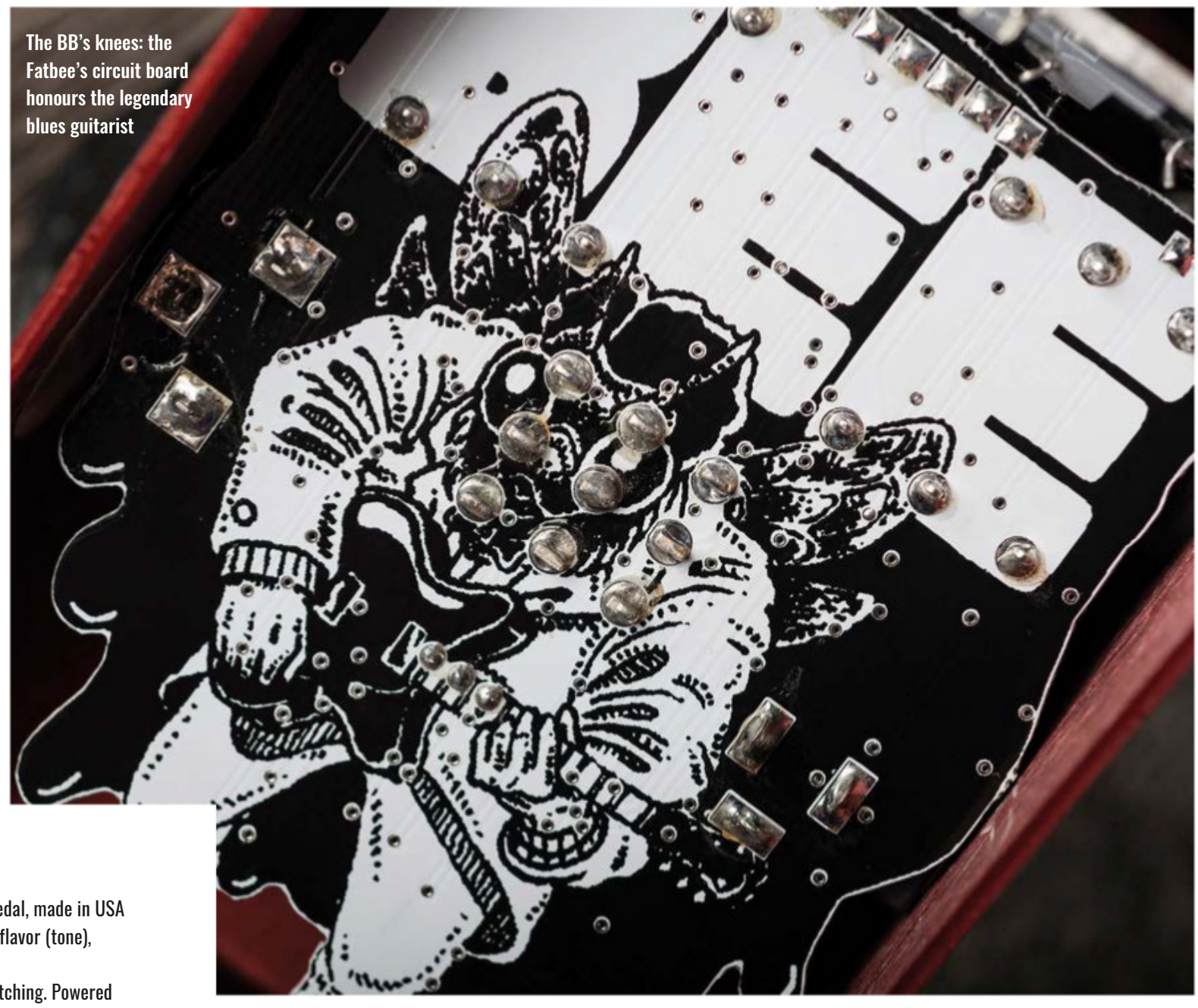
Something that hasn't been lost in the shrinking process is Beetronics' visual style. That crimson brushed-aluminium finish radiates class, while the top panel – which extends neatly around the central footswitch – is a masterclass in steampunk charm.

You might notice that there's a nod to the legendary Maestro Fuzz-Tone too, in the overall form of the pedal: a foot-friendly wedge whose controls are safely stowed along the top.

Those controls have the brand's usual sweet names but the stripped-back nature of the Fatbee means that there are no extra features here, just output level, tone and gain. Fair enough, though it's something of a shame that the knobs are ridged, because the way they catch the light can make it tough to see the white marker at times.

We've no such reservations about the way Beetronics has expressed its signature quirkiness on the inside of the pedal, though: Fatbee's main circuit board is shaped like an apian BB King – well, with those initials, he was asking for it.

Honey trap: the Fatbee features controls for level, tone and gain



The BB's knees: the Fatbee's circuit board honours the legendary blues guitarist

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £199
DESCRIPTION Overdrive pedal, made in USA
CONTROLS Weight (level), flavor (tone), honey (gain)
FEATURES True bypass switching. Powered by 9-volt mains supply only (not included)
DIMENSIONS 116 x 72 x 56mm
CONTACT face.be, beetronicsfx.com

IN USE

JFET overdrives are known for sounding natural and amp-like; Beetronics pedals are known for sounding fat and gurgling. Can the Fatbee be both at once? Yes.

The basic voice of this unit is more or less transparent, except for a gentle softening of the top end and a throaty thickening of the lower mids. With the honey dial held back at about 10 o'clock, it produces a sweet low-gain overdrive with just enough bite to stop humbuckers getting mushy.

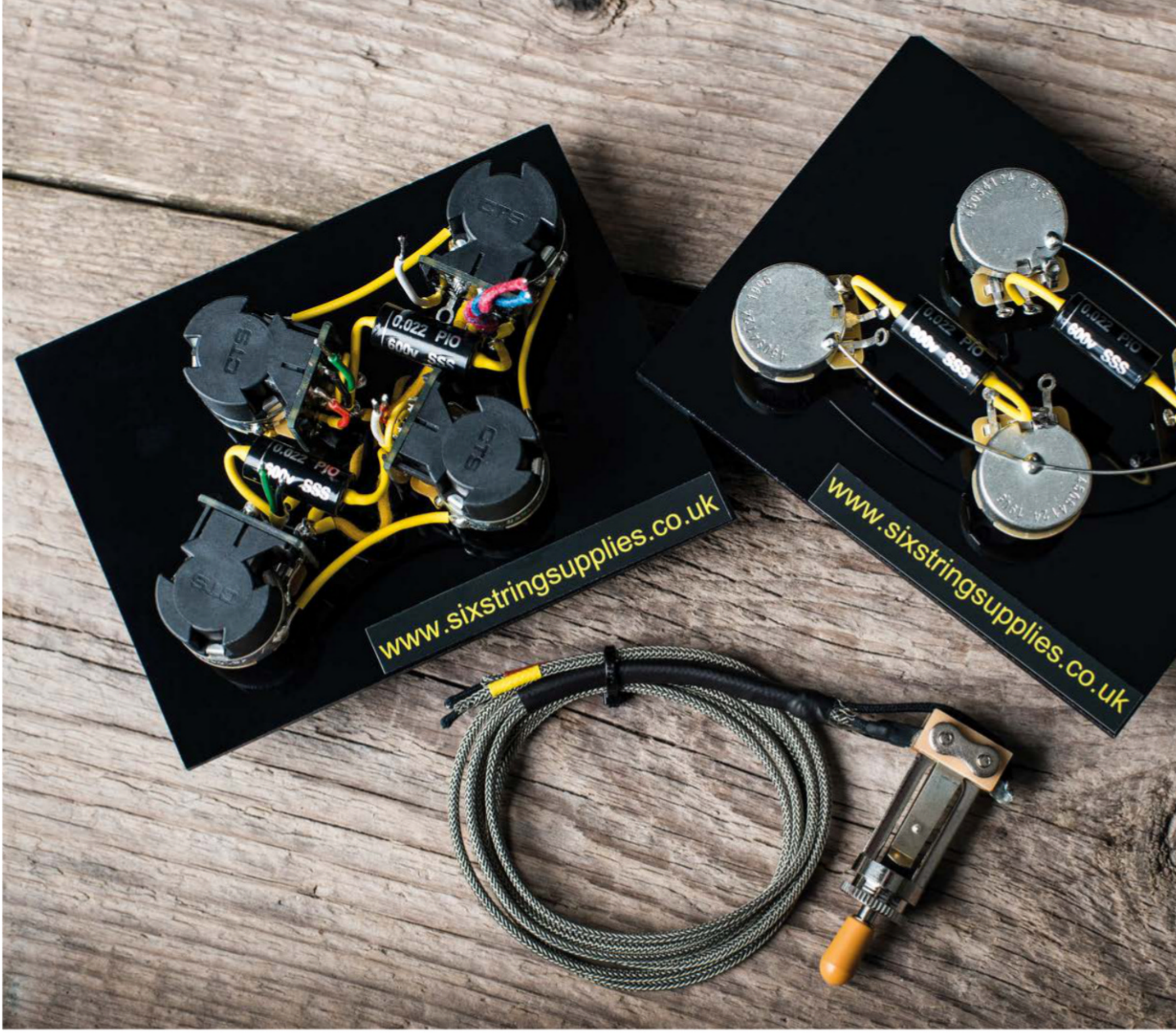
When cranking it up towards maximum gain, the drive doesn't quite reach crazy splat-fuzz levels but instead gets warm and sticky, with very little 'air' but plenty of midrange bark to let choppy power chords cut through. The tone knob responds almost like an amp's presence control, ranging from extra spiky at the top of its range to smooth – but not unusably muffled – near the bottom.

At launch, there was talk of the Babee range being affordable but the Fatbee has flown in at £199 – a bit of a buzzkill. But if you're more worried about square inches than spare cash, this unit gets a Bee-plus.

8/10 **A tiny bundle of sweet Beetronics overdrive but not a tiny price**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Supro Drive **£189**, Pigtronix Fat Drive **£179**, Keeley Super Phat Mod **£139**



SIX STRING SUPPLIES

LES PAUL & JIMMY PAGE WIRING HARNESSES

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

WORDS HUW PRICE

Upgrading your pots and wiring can have as dramatic an impact on tone as swapping out pickups. Will these UK-wired harnesses lend your Les Paul a new lease of life?

From its Wolverhampton headquarters, Six String Supplies offers guitar hardware, electronic components and pre-wired control harnesses designed as upgrades for all the classic guitar models, from Stratocasters, Teles and Jazz Basses to Les Pauls, SGs and ES-335s. The company's harnesses are hand-wired, tested in house and assembled using the highest-quality US and European components. Custom harnesses with trick wiring are available by request too.

The company measures every component using a multimeter to ensure tight, consistent tolerances, claiming that tight tolerances contribute to better-performing guitars.

The Les Paul harness on test features CTS TVT (True Vintage Taper) potentiometers, while the Jimmy Page harness has CTS pots with push/pull switching and delivers 21 possible tonal combinations. Both have paper-in-oil 0.022uF capacitors imported from the US, much like the Bumble Bee caps Gibson used in the 1950s.

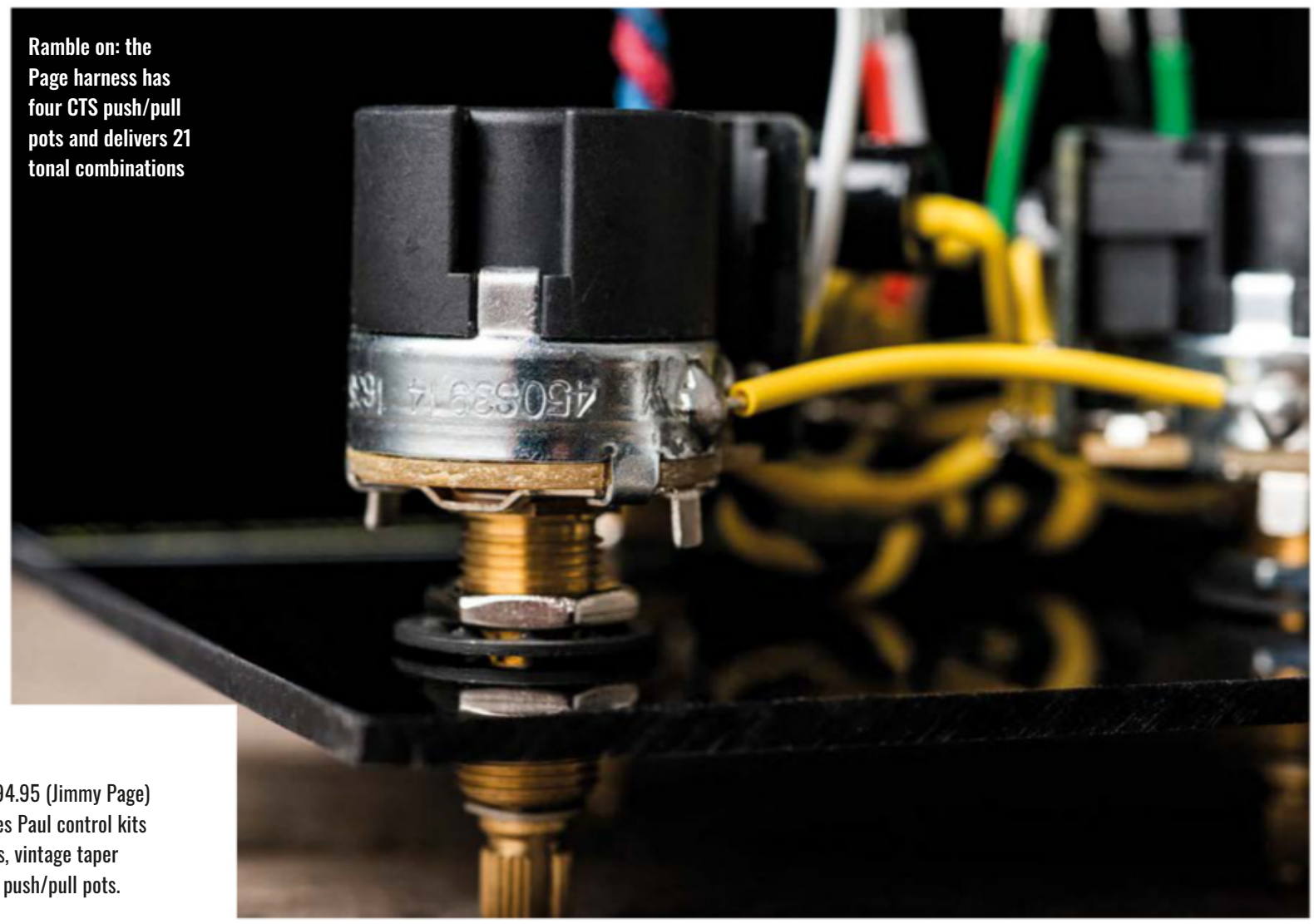
IN USE

Not every company has the ability to get 1950s-style tone-control wiring quite right but Six String Supplies certainly does. All the potentiometers read within a few ohms of each other, and two of them happen to match exactly.

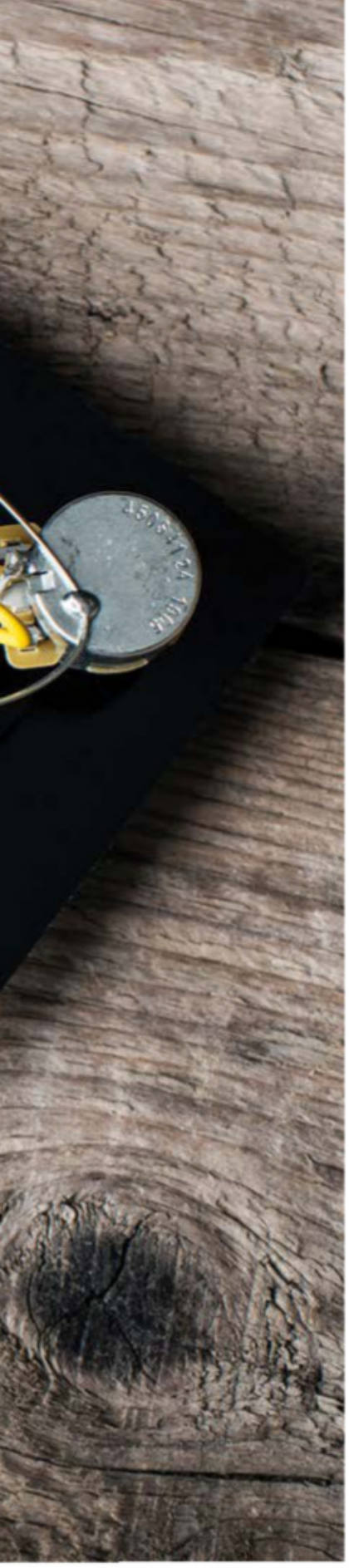
The Les Paul harness proves relatively easy to install (flip to our Les Paul wiring workshop on p125 for tips) and sees the guitar's overall clarity and tonal depth improve immediately. The controls behave much like those on a vintage instrument, with no unwanted treble loss and wonderfully responsive tone pots.

The Jimmy Page harness is considerably easier to use than it is to install but it's within the scope of any competent DIY enthusiast with some degree of soldering experience. We're using House Of Tone PAFs for testing, which may account for the coil-split tones (which are produced by pulling the volume controls) sounding much better than expected.

Capacity crowd: the vintage-style 0.022uF paper-in-oil caps are imported from the USA



Ramble on: the Page harness has four CTS push/pull pots and delivers 21 tonal combinations



KEY FEATURES

PRICE £64.95 (Les Paul) £94.95 (Jimmy Page)
DESCRIPTION Pre-wired Les Paul control kits with paper-in-oil capacitors, vintage taper CTS potentiometers or CTS push/pull pots. Hand-wired in the UK
OPTIONS Pre-wired Switchcraft toggle switch (£30.95), pre-wired output jack (£6.95)
CONTACT sixstringsupplies.co.uk

Pull up the bridge tone pot and you get that out-of-phase Peter Green sound but without any of the ground-noise issues that tend to occur when the positive and negative connections are reversed with braided wire. It only operates when the pickup selector is in the centre position, and is a useful feature.

The output level always drops but pulling up the neck pickup's tone control compensates by combining the pickups in series – and this works irrespective of pickup selector position. When the pickups are in phase, it provides a significant boost in level, which thickens the tone and lifts volume.

If your Les Paul already had 500k pots and vintage-correct tone capacitors, you probably won't notice much difference when all the controls are turned to 10. However, you may hear subtle distinctions when you roll back the volume and tone, due to the vintage-style taper of the pots and the sonic characteristics of the capacitors.

If you're replacing potentiometers with non-standard values, the changes may be more profound. For an extended period, Gibson fitted 300k rather than 500k pots; those guitars can sound muddy as a result.

Installing these harnesses in place of 300k pots will result in a significant improvement in clarity and treble response, even more so than installing high-end boutique pickups and at a considerably lower cost.

Which of the harnesses you go for will depend on whether you're simply chasing old-school tone and response or you're after a more versatile array of additional sounds. If it's the latter, check out the Jimmy Page harness, as it'll equip your guitar to do everything a vintage Les Paul can and much more.

9/10 **Beautifully assembled looms with vintage-correct wiring and top-quality components make both options cost-effective upgrades**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Monty's Guitars 50s Loom for Les Paul **£72**, Home of Tone Signature Series Pre-Wired Les Paul 'Short Shaft' harness kit **£54.99**, Axesrus Wiring Loom for Les Paul with Switch **£83.77**

ISOLATION ESSENTIALS

WORDS CILLIAN BREATHNACH

With the world on lockdown and your gear stripped back to the bare necessities, it can be tough to keep your creative juices flowing. Here, we've rounded up some home-friendly options to help you simulate new tones, sounds and even bandmates – without annoying the neighbours

BOSS WAZA-AIR
£378

1 Closer to a head-mounted VR amp than a pair of average cans, this innovative Boss product is supported by some extraordinarily sophisticated internal tech. The head-tracking function allows you to place your amp and backing band 'in the room' with you, effectively building a convincing virtual soundstage that responds to your movement. The Waza-Air headset allows you to practise the way you would with a cranked amp and a band – only with fewer complaints from roommates.

DIGITECH TRIO+
£155

2 Unlike your ever-so-polite friends and coworkers, this novel pedal *actually listens* to your playing. The Trio+ then cleverly picks apart your chord progressions and rhythms to create a dynamic backing track via a virtual drummer and bassist. Here, DigiTech has found a way to help you uphold the jamming experience without the need for human bandmates – and, with 12 genres to choose from, it should slot neatly into your practice sessions no matter the mood you're in.

BLACKSTAR FLY 3
£59

3 For those separated from their regular rig or who otherwise want something a little smaller to play with at home, the bijou Blackstar Fly is a staggeringly good option. Its drive channel outperforms any other in its class, with no audible fizz. It's battery powered too, which means you can cart it down to the end of the garden for an outdoor jam – remember outside? Fear not, unplugged players, there's even an acoustic variant available (see p108 for our review).

STRYMON IRIDIUM
£399

5 The popularity of pedalboard amps has grown rapidly in recent years and now more than ever these pint-sized options seem like ideal home solutions. With three classic amp tones, each with a trio of cab-sim options, the Iridium is one of the most impressive. The ace up its sleeve is the room control, which adds an airy three-dimensional quality to the sound. It's designed for running into a PA but the built-in headphone socket makes the Iridium a solid home option, especially if you're stuck for space.

TC ELECTRONIC DITTO LOOPER
£59

6 For many of us, the most we can hope for right now is the chance to play with ourselves. A looper, however, can help us feel like we're not alone, and make the experience much more satisfying. This simple box from TC Electronic strips the looper pedal down to its barest essentials: one knob, one footswitch. Tap to start recording, tap again to stop and immediately play that loop back, tap once more to overdub, hold to undo the last overdub, double tap to stop the loop, and double tap and hold to clear. Easy.

IK MULTIMEDIA IRIG 2
£29

7 Though there are many options when it comes to putting together a virtual rig, the iRig comes with an accompanying app from IK Multimedia that opens up an in-depth set of simulated cabinets, amps and pedals, allowing you to squeeze some sensational tones out of your humble smartphone. It's perfect for those playing through headphones or anyone who wants to mess around with the virtual equivalent of physical gear they can't get their hands on right now. It's excellent value for money, too.

UNIVERSAL AUDIO OX
£1,170

4 Set on sticking with your big rig? Consider Universal Audio's Ox, perhaps the most versatile home-friendly tool of all for those who love the sound and feel of valves. Although it's a capable attenuator, the real magic happens when you plug in a pair of headphones or go direct into your DAW, with the Ox's array of speaker cabinet and mic emulations offering a guitar-recording experience that puts many pro studios to shame. A real game changer.

ORANGE TERROR STAMP
£149

8 One of the highlights of NAMM 2020, the Terror Stamp is essentially an even tinier Tiny Terror, shrunk down to about the size of an overdrive pedal. While it has a cab-simulated headphone-out that allows for jamming at all hours, it can also be connected to any 8- or 16-ohm cabinet, which means it can get very rude very quickly. When the opportunity to play live arises again (remember gigs?), the Terror Stamp will easily pull its weight on stage.

Forsyth
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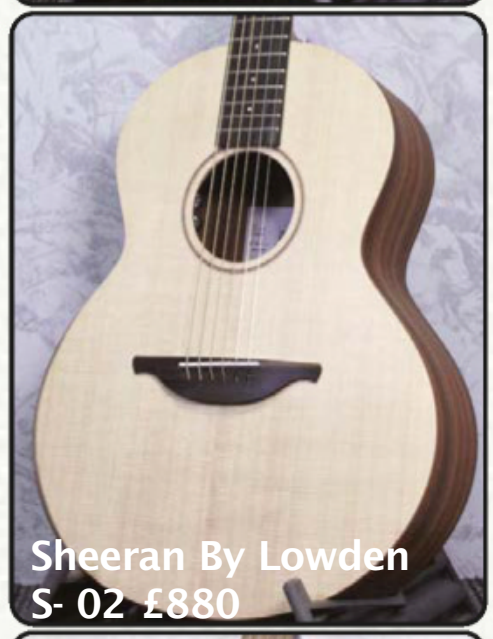
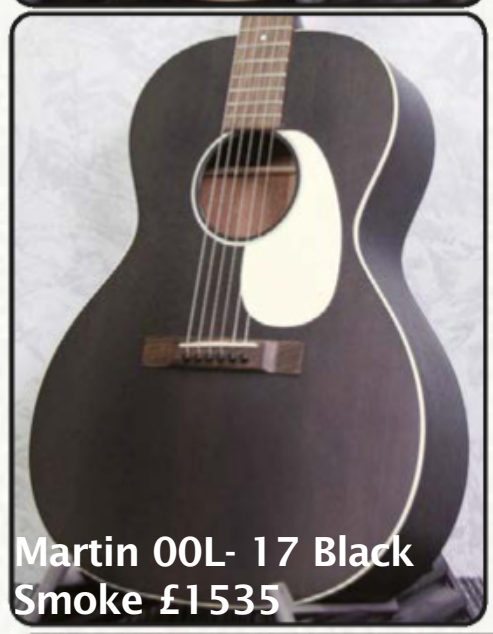
Highlights Of The Month

Atkin "The '43"
£2999

Eastman DT30 OM
£2199


Sheeran By Lowden
S- 02 £880

Gordon Smith GS- 0
Forsyth Special £999


Martin 00L- 17 Black
Smoke £1535

Fender Player Lead III
£539

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INDUSTRY INSIDER

AUDIO KITCHEN

WORDS SAM ROBERTS

After leaving his role as a cameraman to pursue his passion for engineering, Steve Crow founded Audio Kitchen in 2007, embarking on a journey that would take him from reverse-engineering a Lovetone pedal to cooking up amps for AC/DC and Radiohead

How did you get into guitar?

"A friend of mine got a cheap single-pickup Encore electric guitar, which was playable, unlike my dad's acoustics. Jamming along to rock songs using two notes felt really good. I saved up money from my job as a cameraman for our local basketball team to buy a Korean Ibanez and figured out the pentatonic scale along the neck, although I didn't know it was called that at the time. At some point, I picked up a cheap metal distortion pedal and thought I'd become Steve Vai. Sadly, I was pretty lethargic when it came to practising. During my A-Levels, an American friend came through with all the new AOR records from the US and I was really taken by [Counting Crows guitarist] Dave Bryson's minimalist style. On the more bombastic side, I dug Marc Ford and Rich Robinson's work on *The Southern Harmony And Musical Companion*."

When did you start building or tinkering with amps and effects?

"I was working as a recording engineer at Mute Records, and Flood [producer Mark Ellis] was in working on a record – I forget which but perhaps Barry Adamson's – and he had just bought all the Lovetone pedals. I just loved The Big Cheese and asked if I could borrow it over the Christmas period, which was coming up. My brother was an electronic-engineering student at the time, and so he reverse-engineered it, and made me a clone that sounded so good. Dan Coggins' design, a classic. That sowed the seed. Cut to seven or eight years later and I was working at Mutronics, now with some soldering chops and some decent electronics knowledge. I decided that I wanted to knock up an amp after I'd been drooling over a Matchless Lightning 15 in Rose Morris, the famous Denmark Street music shop. An online friend suggested that I buy a five-valve radio from eBay and modify it. It ended up being 12 amps that my wife and I drove to Reading to pick up. That's where it all started."

When did you realise that you had a viable business?

"I worked on the circuit that would become Audio Kitchen's Little Chopper for a couple of years in my own time, and then showed it to a friend. He ordered one immediately and premiered it at the National Bowl in Milton Keynes with Beverley Knight. Mad. Then Flood, Al Moulder and Cenzo Townshend ordered them within a few minutes of hearing them. The Young brothers both ordered them. At that point, I thought, 'Maybe I'm on to something.'"

Did you have any external investment or support when you were starting out?

"Audio Kitchen grew out of Mutronics so we already had a business making professional audio gear. But we still had some lean times. I felt like giving up more than once. Customers such as Flood and Al Moulder, among others, helped during those times. It's hard to thank them enough. If anybody could be said to have invested, it's all of our customers."

The apple never falls far from the tree: The Big Trees spawned this all-valve clean boost

Small wonder: the Little Chopper made its live debut at the National Bowl in Milton Keynes

Out on a limb: The Big Trees turned out to be Audio Kitchen's best-selling product

"I WANTED TO MAKE AN ALL-VALVE AMP THAT COULD ALSO BE USED AS A PEDAL, A KIND OF STUDIO AMP THAT COULD BE PLUGGED INTO A LOUDER AMP TO PLAY GIGS. IT TOOK ON A LIFE OF ITS OWN..."

At what point did you feel like you had really nailed your branding?

"I'm not sure I've ever felt that. I felt happy about getting the Audio Kitchen logo done. My friend Igs did the illustration and writing, and another friend, Nicky at Odessa Designs, arranged all the characters as they appear now. All the curves on the amps evoked the right emotions in me but it never consciously felt like branding, per se. It is gratifying to make things that visually set themselves apart from the pack though. That's the primary motivator."

How did you come up with your best-selling product?

"The Big Trees – three years of messing about with circuits and layouts, plenty of disillusion, and a few stand-up rows with my colleague James. I wanted to make an all-valve amp that could also be used as a pedal, a kind of studio amp that could be plugged into a louder amp to play gigs. It took on a life of its own after release and has proved a favourite in studios. It seems it's versatile enough to span genres and applications; just look at the user page on our website to see the breadth of styles described by the artists who use them. It blows my mind. Humbled doesn't begin to describe it.

"Even the bypass side has won fans, and eventually spawned The Small Trees, which has found a fanbase among session bass players, kickstarted by David Baker. What seems to grab people about The Big Trees is that, when used as a pedal, it sounds and responds to playing like an amp, because it is an amp. I think Judah Bauer from the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion was probably the first to say that it just doesn't sound like a pedal, which is precisely what I was aiming for during the design process."

What's your proudest moment as a maker?

"That's tough. Angus and Malcolm Young saying they wanted Little Choppers. Sitting in Hyde Park, watching Kings of Leon using Base Choppers and playing to 60,000 people. Reeves Gabrels headlining Glastonbury with The Cure last year. Watching Radiohead in Manchester with Ed O'Brien using twin Big Choppers. Queens Of The Stone Age, Foo Fighters, The Edge, Al Moulder and Flood, Foals, Death Cab For Cutie, Justin Vernon, Jacknife Lee, the list goes on. Looking at the names of all those players and thinking about all the others I haven't mentioned, many of whom have become friends, makes me more thankful than proud. It's a privilege to have played a part in their creativity. Gil Norton just messaged me – I mean, come on!"

What are the biggest opportunities for the guitar industry in 2020?

"COVID-19 seems, as of right now, to be the single biggest factor in the industry. It could affect everything from health and the economy to the movement of people. Let's hope our countries' leaders get their management correct quickly."

What's next for Audio Kitchen?

"There might just be a solid-state pedal loosely based on The Big Trees in the works but my timescales are so long and I don't want to get anybody's hopes up. What I am trying to do is model, in the analogue domain, all the foibles of The Big Trees, and it's taken me quite a long time. A friend of mine, Damon McCartney, is something of a SPICE ninja and has helped me model circuits on a computer before doing it all in the real-world, which has somewhat sped up the process, but there is still a long way to go. It'll be out when it's right. Watch this space."

Find out more about Audio Kitchen at audiokitchen.co.uk

SHOP TALK

JOE YANUZIELLO
GUITAR MAKER

WORDS DAVE HUNTER

On those rare occasions that art and luthiery meet, rarely do they coalesce into such unforced and loveable results as in the work of Joe Yanuziello, a Canadian guitar maker whose creations reveal greater depths the deeper you probe

The first-glance response to Joe Yanuziello's flagship electric guitars tends to be, "Aw, now isn't *that* cute". His hand-made archtops, flat-tops, mandolins, resos, and acoustic Hawaiian lap steel guitars have long drawn gasps of awe and wonder but, these days, it's his electrics that are commanding the most attention.

Look closely and you'll uncover much more about these guitars than their 1950s catalogue-inspired lines and pickups might imply. The $6,000-plus price tags are the clearest-cut clue that there's more than meets the eye here, and the outright quality of the workmanship should reinforce this inkling. The made-in-house hardware and plastics, the bespoke pickups, and the chequerboard or tortoiseshell binding, it all combines to declare these guitars something different, something special. Yet for Yanuziello himself, it's always been, first and foremost, about the music that will be made with them.

"Once I've turned the idea in my head into a three-dimensional object with a life of its own," he says, "the big reward is having a musician use that instrument express themselves. Playing a part in another artist's expression is fulfilling and personal, and hopefully the instrument is inspiring for them as well."

BOY IN THE 'HOOD

Joe Yanuziello was born in Toronto in 1952, and experienced the kind of optimistic post-war urban North American upbringing of the 1950s and 1960s that seemed so richly able to prime young craftsmen for eclectic careers. It was Yanuziello's family that provided his introduction to the tools that would prove pivotal to his success.

"We lived on a street two doors down from my Italian grandmother, my aunt and my cousins," says Yanuziello. "The street and neighbourhood were primarily comprised of Italian and Jewish families.

College Street and Kensington Market were just around the corner from my family home. My father had a sheet-metal shop in a laneway close by. I can remember riding my tricycle up the street to his shop and hanging out while he worked.

"He was a capable guy, and a woodworker as well. I can still smell the shavings curling out of his hand plane in the basement. In the mid-1960s, we moved to a rural area north of Toronto. My father built us a home on about five acres of land. After that, he was contracted to build a handful of homes in the area, and I worked summers with him. Aside from learning how to use hand tools, what I retained from that was the confidence to try things and trust my abilities."

CATCHING THE RY

Meanwhile, the local music scene had inspired in our budding luthier a love of the guitar, as the skills to create instruments himself were coming together organically. "I was lucky enough to see Jimi Hendrix in Toronto," says Yanuziello, "just after the first album was released. I got to see Howlin' Wolf, Bukka White, Rory Gallagher, Blind Faith, Asleep At The Wheel, David Lindley and El Rayo-X, and Lenny Breau, as well as all of the great local bands and singer-songwriters of the era.

"I was 16 in 1968 – too young to get into clubs, but my friends and I frequented coffeehouses downtown. One place, the Riverboat, had the best music, and it was there that I first encountered Ry Cooder. I saw him three nights in a row, just him, his Martin flat-top and his Gibson mandolin. It was life-altering for me. It still is – I've seen him every time he's come to Toronto."

Yanuziello's experiences in the Ontario city's coffeehouses and concert venues inspired him to kick off playing guitar and laid the foundations for a more intimate appreciation of the instrument. In other ways, though, his teen years were tough for a kid who, like so many other budding artists, didn't quite fit the mould.

Gift that keeps giving: Joe Yanuziello designed the body and headstock of his core electric guitar in 1982, and has been hand-building custom models one at a time ever since

Smooth operation: Yanuziello hand-builds his guitars in his shop, a 19th-century former cheese factory on the Niagara peninsula, south of Toronto

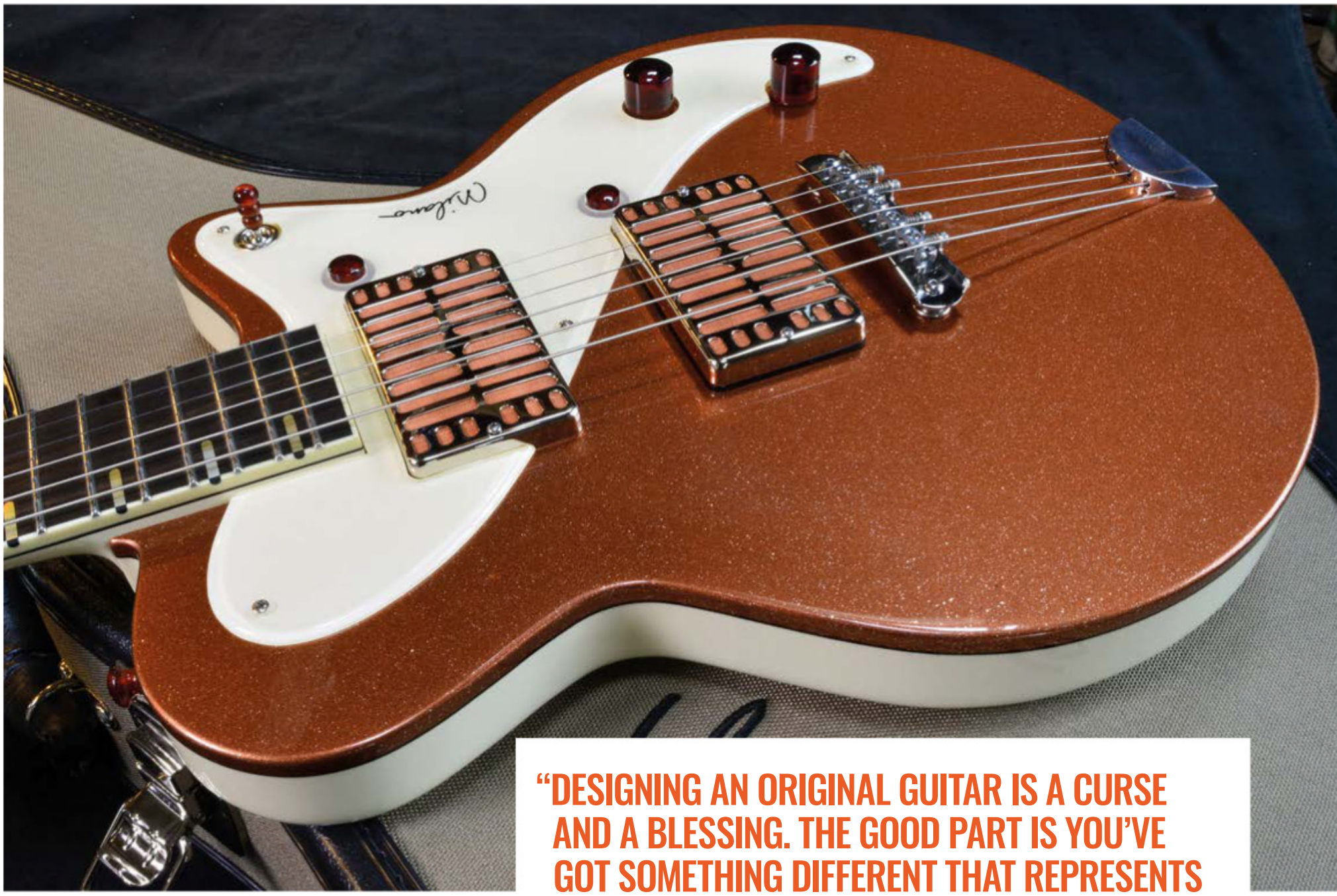
"High school was an abysmal time for me," says the then-fledgling musician. So much so, that he didn't see it through. Instead, Yanuziello dropped out and travelled to Europe with two friends, which proved an eye-opening cultural experience and turned things around for him. Back home in Canada, Yanuziello was accepted into art college, after which he landed his first woodworking job, a gig covering particle-board boxes with Formica and plastic laminates. As unglamorous as it was, the work gave him a lot of practise in routing, trimming and filing the difficult material, skills that he still puts to use today.

It was during his downtime in this position that Yanuziello began building his first guitar, a flat-top acoustic. It would eventually be joined by an archtop, and a host of others as he honed his skills, in that pre-internet age, at the elbows of local luthiers and from the pages of tomes such as Irving Sloane's *Steel-String Guitar Construction*.

FROM FORMICA TO FURNITURE

Emerging guitarists and guitar-makers are forced to face similarly difficult decisions when life threatens to get real: do they keep doing whatever it is that promises to make them a living or abandon all hope of stability and opt, instead, to play the guitar – or, alternatively, choose to build them instead?

Integrating his experience building houses with his degree in art, Yanuziello soon graduated from laminating chipboard boxes to more creative work in a high-quality custom cabinetry shop, undertaking fine architectural millwork and other more refined woodworking duties. He opened his own furniture shop in 1984 but the virus from that musical bug that had bitten years ago was beginning to take hold like never before. He completed guitar after guitar on the side and, about 20 years after the initial infection, found that he couldn't fight it any longer. He had to dedicated his life to the instrument proper.



“DESIGNING AN ORIGINAL GUITAR IS A CURSE AND A BLESSING. THE GOOD PART IS YOU’VE GOT SOMETHING DIFFERENT THAT REPRESENTS YOU. THE DOWNSIDE IS THAT IT TAKES ENERGY, VISIBILITY, AND PATIENCE TO CONVINCE THE BUYING PUBLIC THAT THIS THING WORKS”

“I gave up my furniture business to build guitars in about 1999,” he says. “Even though I built my first guitar in 1979, I was a late bloomer as a full-time instrument maker.”

Even a cursory glance at Yanuziello’s distinctive work is likely to reveal some indications as to his early influences but his instruments come together in ways that bely elementary categorisation. Like many builders, his output is something of a product of what turned him on about other instruments in the first place, but the heights to which he’s taken these inspirations reveal deeper forces at play.

Back in 1970s Toronto, at about the time he was getting into fingerstyle, Yanuziello discovered a trove of vintage equipment right on his doorstep. “There was a fantastic vintage-guitar shop downtown called the Millwheel,” he says, “with these beautiful old pearl Martins, Gibsons and Washburns. One part of the store was devoted to hand-built acoustics, mostly from local builders. On the wall you’d see a couple of Laskins and Wrens, as well as Oskar Graf guitars. I was astonished at how Oskar bent his cutaways to the graceful shape of the heel. It was magic to me. And Grit [Laskin] was doing beautiful inlays even back then.”

Get to grips with Yanuziello’s archtop and flat-top acoustics and his admiration for pre-war styling and craftsmanship becomes clear, and is ultimately expressed in a range of instruments that you might mistake as being from that era were it not for their new-guitar shine. Most of the attention for his more modern-looking electrics has come from beyond Canada’s borders, and in recent years in particular. It’s these astounding creations by which players in the UK, Europe and the US are most likely to know Yanuziello today.

Cream of the crop: the Milano is a limited edition of 10 instruments, each with Mojo Dual Foil humbuckers and a different lacquered finish, including this two-tone Copper Sparkle on Mascarpone Cream

ELECTRIC AVENUE

As he started playing more electric guitar himself in the early-1980s, Yanuziello turned mostly to a 1967 Fender Telecaster Custom and a late-1950s Harmony/Silvertone Stratotone, the collectible Model 1421 variant with ‘Hershey bar’ pickups that had been the staple of several notable blues guitarists. Put the two together and the path to Yanuziello’s own electrics becomes more clearly illuminated.

“I designed my electric guitar in 1982,” he says. “Back then, the ones that I made had typical solid bodies, and stock hardware and pickups. Since 1995, though, all of my electrics have been hollow-bodied. I was taking cues from my 1950s Harmony/Silvertone. That guitar was light and the Hershey bar pickups they were using at the time sounded fantastic. The tone was lively and the notes just seemed to jump out at you.

“But the issue with that guitar and many catalogue-style guitars of that time was the playability. The necks were narrow with barely any taper, the fretboards were often cheap woods that’d been dyed to look like ebony,

"THE DESIGN ASPECT OF MY INSTRUMENTS IS IMPORTANT TO ME. I LIKE TO THINK ALL THE DETAILS AND THE INDIVIDUAL COMPONENTS ON MY INSTRUMENTS HAVE A LIFE OF THEIR OWN"

Small change: alongside electric guitars, Yanuziello oversees a four-strong family of electric mandolins, made up of mandolin, mandola, mandocello, and octave mandolin, all of which boast custom hand-built components

and the finishes were *just about* enough to make them look like more expensive instruments. It wasn't a tall order to improve on those guitars but keep the tone that made them great and so different from what Fender and Gibson were doing."

In addition to the inherent sonic improvements that come with his particular style of construction, one of the things that many players immediately notice upon first hoisting a Yanuziello guitar is that they're so lightweight.

"With the electrics, the bodies are always hollowed-out billets of a hardwood such as mahogany, alder or soft maple," he says. "This hollowed-out concept is also applied to my electric mandolin family: mandolin, mandola, mandocello, and octave mandolin. When the bodies are routed out, I leave 1/4 inch of material on the back and glue on a top cap of the same thickness. The electric mandolin body shape is a scaled-down version of my electric guitar, with the mandola size in the middle. I like the fact that they all share that shape, and the peghead is the same for all of them, just scaled down."

HARDWARE HOMEBREW

In 1992, Yanuziello designed the metal combo bridge and pickup covers that he manufactures himself and that appear on many of his guitars. With his new approach to construction and the addition of these and other in-house components, his guitars became truly custom.

"I mostly use brass and sometimes aluminium to fabricate these parts," he says. "Non-ferrous metals are easy to work with; they cut, shape and polish beautifully and I don't need machine-shop equipment to make them. Since those early days of making basic hardware, I now have many bridge designs, in wood and metal, as well as tailpiece designs that I can make in my shop.

"For the past few years or so, I have also been making my own control knobs and switch tips using thermosetting plastic that I machine from blocks that I cast, or that I've machined from other vintage plastics that I find.

"Designing an original guitar that is non-derivative is a curse and a blessing. The good part is you've got something different that represents you and your ideas, and if you can turn that into a brand people accept, you're on your way to having your cake.

Blue steel: Yanuziello's extensive range includes electric and acoustic lap steel instruments plus resonators, archtops and flat-top acoustics

The downside of having an original design is that it takes energy, visibility, and patience to convince the buying public that this thing that they don't recognise, that you're trying to sell them, works as well as the Chevys and Fords that they accept unconditionally."

GOING FOR GOLD

Early in his electric-making tenure, Yanuziello sought out original DeArmond 'S-top' gold-foil pickups to mount on his own builds. Inevitably, these eventually dried up, and a source of new renditions was required.

"My friends stopped taking my calls for old pickups," he says, "and finally I discovered Fralin pickups. I called Lindy [Fralin] and he agreed to wind me a version of a Hershey bar pickup. He had a fondness for those as well. It worked out well; he wound the pickups and I made the metal covers. About 25 years later, we're still doing it. He's also made humbucking versions for me on occasion. Lately, I've been offering his mini-humbuckers if someone wants a humbucking tone."

For other options, Yanuziello sometimes turns to Lollar Gold Foils, and has, on his Milano Series guitars, recently used Mojo Dual Foils, which essentially pack two gold-foils side by side under one metal grille to form a single humbucker.

The Milano is a limited edition of sorts, and follows on from a guitar Yanuziello first made for long-time customer Kevin Breit, who has played with Rosanne Cash, KD Lang and Nora Jones, and recently named his new solo album *Stella Bella Strada* after the name he and the guitar-maker gave his signature model.

A real looker – "it was my interpretation of a 1960s Euro/Italian electric," says Yanuziello – it's another in a long line of guitars that draw sincere admiration for their style and grace. For a real cutie pie, though, check out another model suggested by Breit, a diminutive candy-coloured confection dubbed the Cupcake. "It's the size of a bakelite Rickenbacker," says Yanuziello, "and fits in the overhead compartment of an airplane. He was touring with Cassandra Wilson then, and needed something he could take along."

Among other artists, Yanuziello has built acoustic resonator guitars, traditional hollow-neck acoustic lap steels, and electric lap steels for Don Rooke of The Henrys, Cowboy Junkies, and Mary Margaret O'Hara's band, and electric guitars for Bill Frisell and Toronto-based jazz artist Rob Piltch, and each has been different in its style and appointments. To some extent, though, Yanuziello shakes off any efforts to foist accusations of 'uniqueness' upon his work.

"I offer the same hardware, pickups and bridges on all the instruments," he says. "I hand-make all the parts specifically for each instrument, so there's this continuity across the spectrum that appeals to me, and within that there are many options for colour, trim, wood, plastic binding and pickguards.

"The design aspect of my instruments is important to me. I like to think all the details and the individual components on my instruments have a life of their own. You could take any of them out of context – the control knobs, the pickguards, the bridges and tailpieces – and they would look complete on their own. They're much like Alexander Calder's mobile sculptures – no matter what your perspective, the shapes and lines just look right. One thing that I appreciate about good design is that you don't have to understand why it works, it just works. There's no training involved; the designer has done that for you." G

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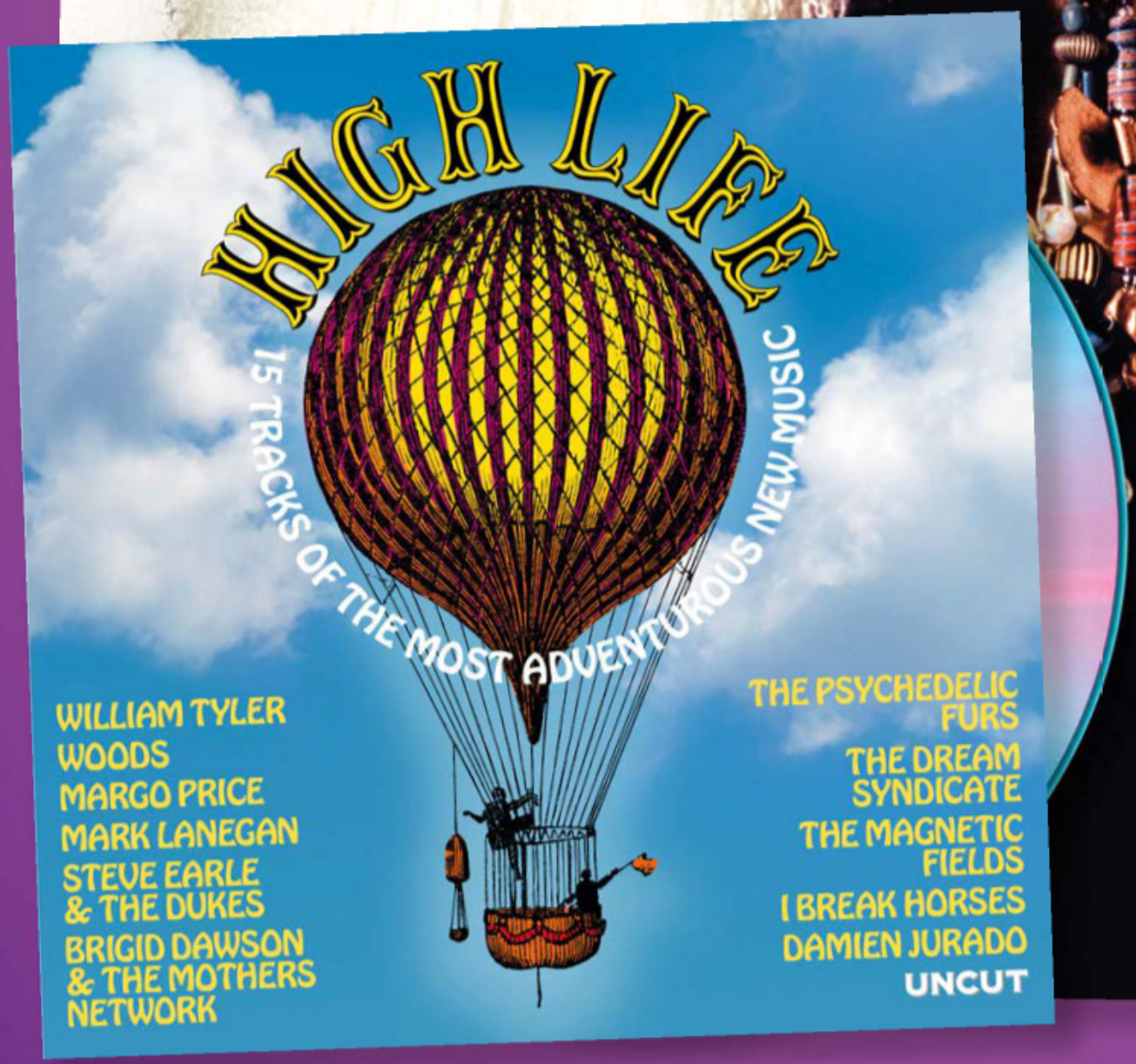

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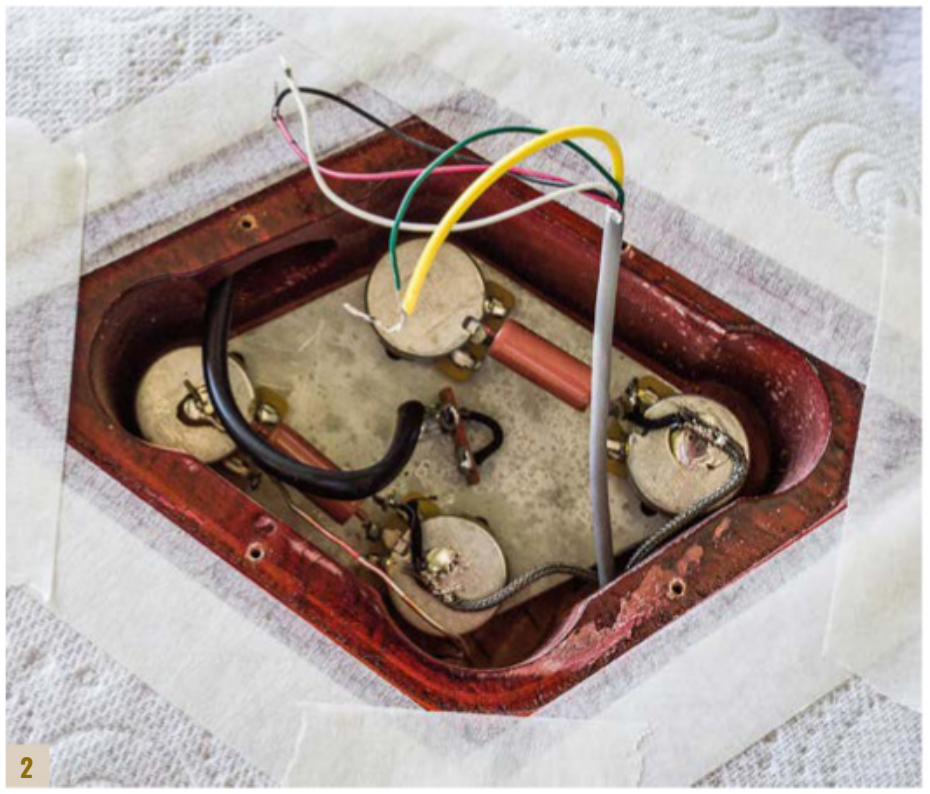
DIY WORKSHOP

HOW TO REWIRE A LES PAUL

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY HUW PRICE

Think twice before you install that set of boutique PAF clones – you might be surprised by how much extra clarity you can get from your beloved Gibson by simply upgrading the wiring and components

1



2

1 The tone caps have previously been upgraded but the Gibson-branded pots and metal mounting plate are all factory parts

2 Kitchen paper is taped to the body to protect it from solder splashes and the switch wires are disconnected

3 Here, the ground wire is soldered to the casing of the neck tone potentiometer, but it's usually soldered to the neck volume

4 The ground wire still needs to be desoldered but the jack, switch wires and pickup wires are all disconnected

5 The surround screws are removed and the pickup wires are pulled out of the body

6 The potentiometer nuts are undone and the factory controls are lifted out

3

There are many reasons to rewire a Gibson-style solidbody. Pickup swapping is commonplace but most people leave the controls and wiring alone. You may be happy with your pickups but if you research potentiometers and capacitors, you might discover that there's still headroom to improve your guitar's tone and response.

Perhaps you've finally lost patience with that noisy, crackly switch and want to upgrade the other components, and try out some trick wiring while you're at it. If your guitar wasn't that expensive to begin with, upgrading the pots and caps may improve tone and reliability.

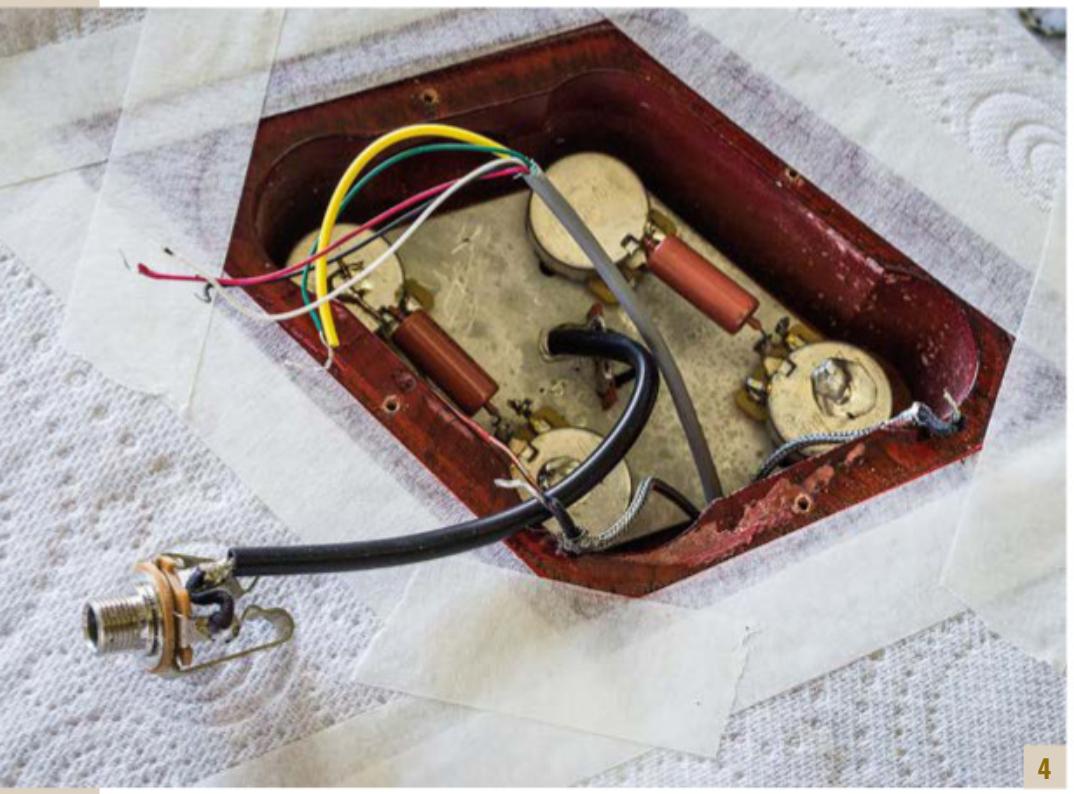
The cheapest option is to buy all the components and wire everything yourself – but be warned: this can prove fiddly. DIY Les Paul harnesses can be a challenge for soldering novices, and even those with expertise would struggle to better the Six String Supplies prewired harnesses featured here (read our review on p125). Fancy wiring up Jimmy Page-style for out-of-phase, in series and coil-split options? It's a seriously daunting proposition.

Prewired harnesses are sold by various companies and make rewiring your guitar considerably easier. Les Paul harnesses are available with long and short potentiometer shafts, so you may need to remove a couple of potentiometer nuts and pointer washers to determine which you need. If you end up ordering long shafts by mistake, you'll still be able to use the harness, but if the maple cap is too thick for short shaft pots, you won't be able to install it.

We're approaching this as a complete rewiring project, and stripping everything out of our donor guitar. But if you're only interested in doing a partial job, that's fine. You can replace the controls but leave the switch and pickups where they are or, if you're only replacing the switch wiring, you can leave the pickups and controls in place, though you may need to lift the pickups out of the body in order to send the switch wires through the routed channels. Hopefully there'll be something for everybody in this DIY Workshop. Use whatever you need.

STEP BY STEP

Whether you're rewiring a Les Paul or wiring one up for the first time, there's a series of steps that you should follow to ensure you get the best possible results.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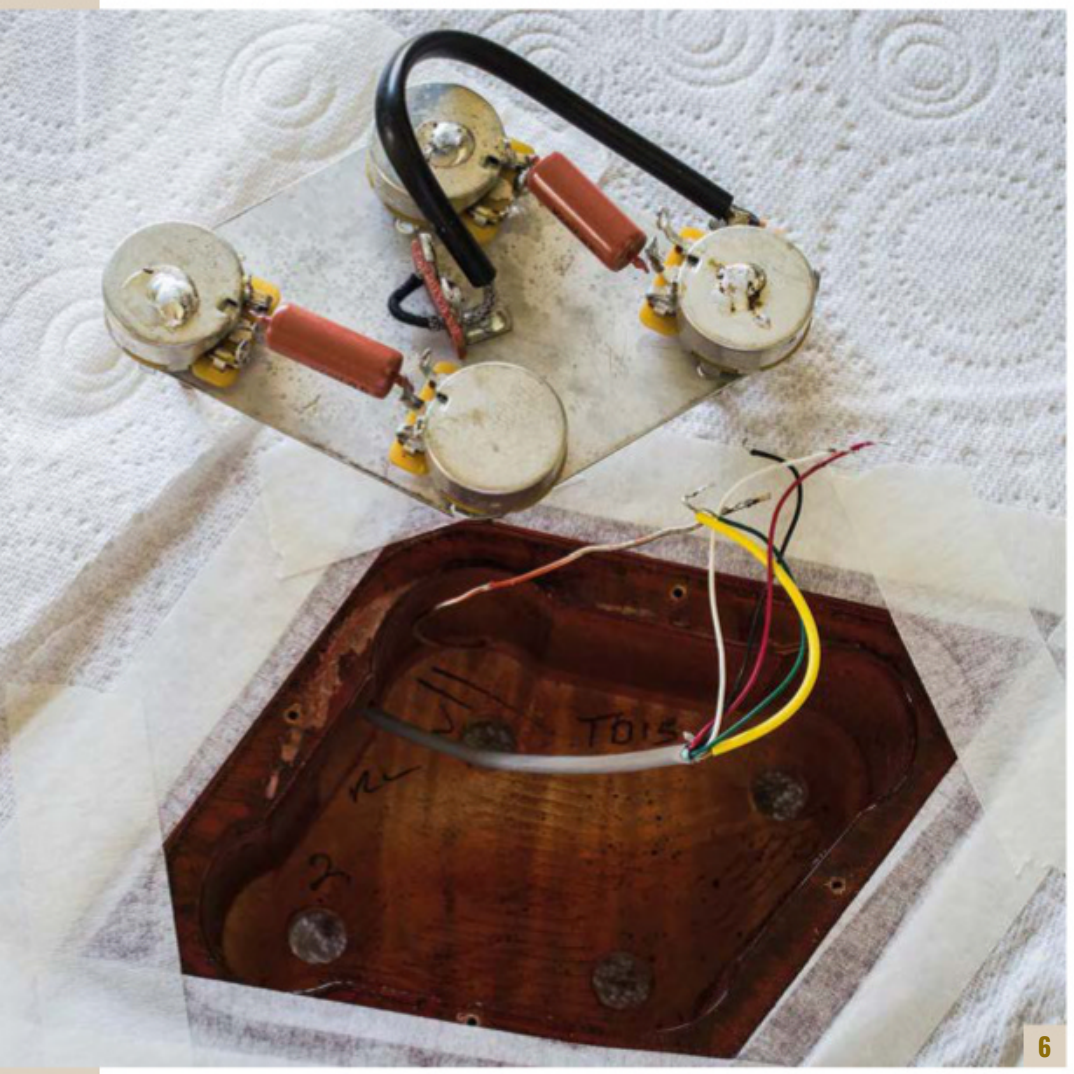

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Unlike traditional Fenders, some Les Paul electronic components are installed from the front and others from the back. Approach this systematically or you'll have bits falling off the guitar every time you flip it over, which you'll need to do more than once.

Begin by removing the rear plates that cover the control and switch cavities. Place the bits you remove somewhere safe so you don't lose them. The plastic containers from takeaway meals are ideal – if you're working on a few guitars at once, just put the lids on and label the contents.

If the cover plates are wedged into their rebates, don't prise them out. Instead, roll masking tape into a loop with the sticky side outwards, place it onto the plate and press down firmly. The tape will stick to the plate and your fingers, and should lift out easily.

Have your soldering iron ready because it's time to start unhooking those wires. If you're just changing the switch, you'll only need to disconnect the wires leading to the output jack and volume controls.

The signal wires will be connected to the centre tags of the volume pots and the ground connections may be made to the pot casings or a separate ground connection – on a PCB or tag strip, depending on the guitar. The best way to disconnect the jack socket is to unscrew the plate, pull it clear of the body and desolder the wire.

If you're taking the controls out, you'll need to disconnect the pickup wires too, along with the ground wire from the bridge that enters the control cavity through a hole in the side and probably connects to one of the pot casings.

BACK TO FRONT

Now it's time to flip the guitar over and onto its back to work from the top. If you haven't done so already, you'll need get the strings out of the way. But first, be sure to measure the bridge height using a ruler or, better still, digital calipers, so that you can easily return your guitar to the way it was set up before you began work on it. Remove the strings, tailpiece and bridge, and set them all aside.

To remove a pickup, take out the four surround screws, lift the whole assembly off the guitar and carefully draw out the hookup wire along with it. If the guitar has two pickups, it might well be easier to remove the bridge unit first, but the procedure for removing the neck pickup is identical.

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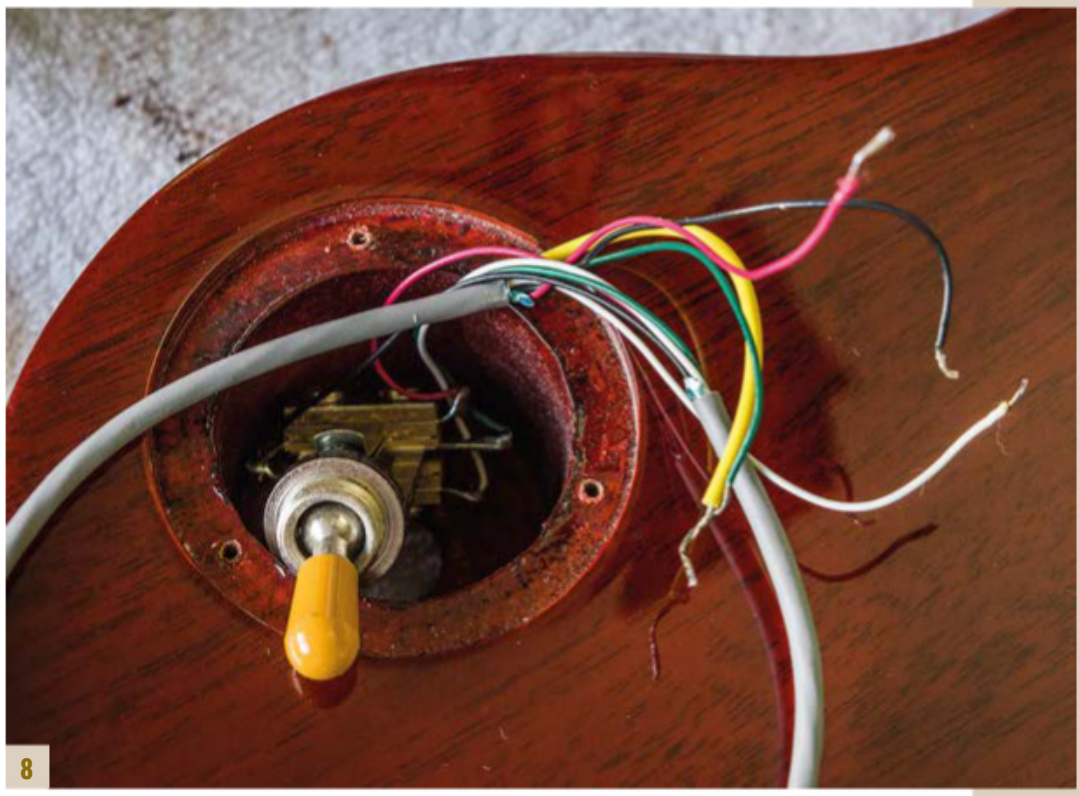
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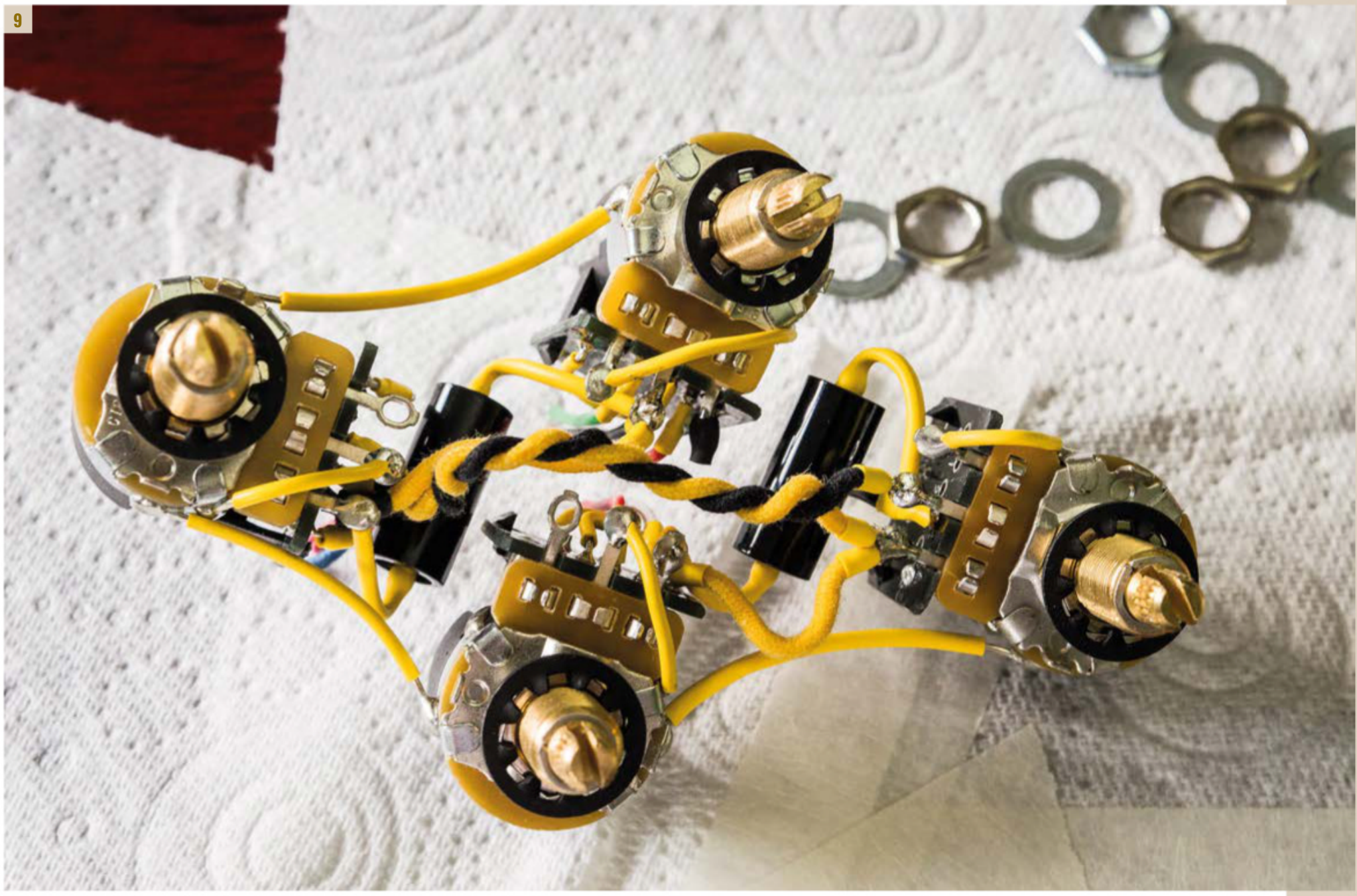
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Before detaching the switch wires, it's advisable to label them if you intend to keep the same switch. Removing the knurled nut that holds the switch in position is easy but doing so without damaging the poker chip – or the finish, in the absence of a poker chip – is less straightforward. Use the correct tool for the job, such as an Allparts toggle-switch box spanner (part number LT-4201-023).

If you can't or don't want to get one, and use pliers instead, protect the poker chip or finish around the switch with masking tape. You could also wrap tape around the jaws of the pliers for extra insurance but, if you mess up, don't say we didn't warn you.

DROP THE POTS

With the knurled nut loose and the chip removed, you should be able to pull the switch out, and the wires should follow. If the wires are bundled together with plastic cable ties, remove them before pulling the wires through so that there's no chance of them snagging the body's wire channels.

Now it's time to flip the guitar back onto its front. We strongly advise that you conduct work such as this on a soft surface – carpet offcuts are suitable, as are folded blankets or bath towels. Take care to set any parts you remove to one side, especially sharp metal ones.

Again, pliers are not the best option for fixing and removing pots. For CTS pots, you need a half-inch socket. Undo and remove the four nuts, along with the washers, and allow the controls to drop into the cavity.

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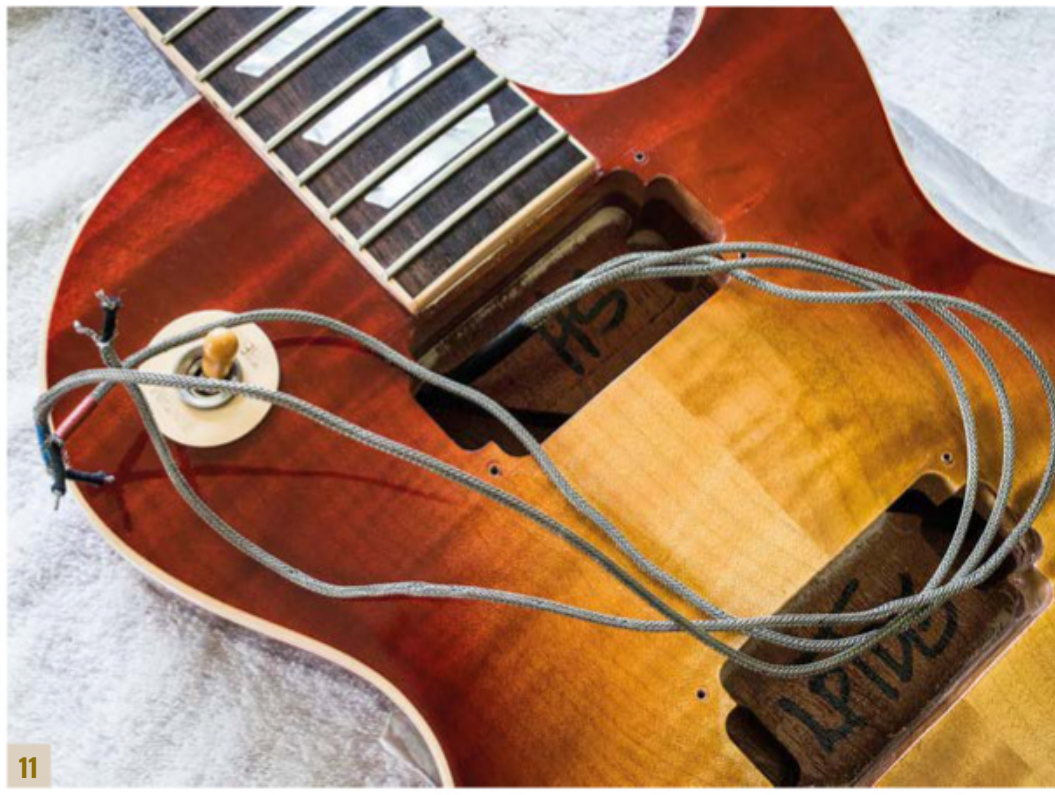
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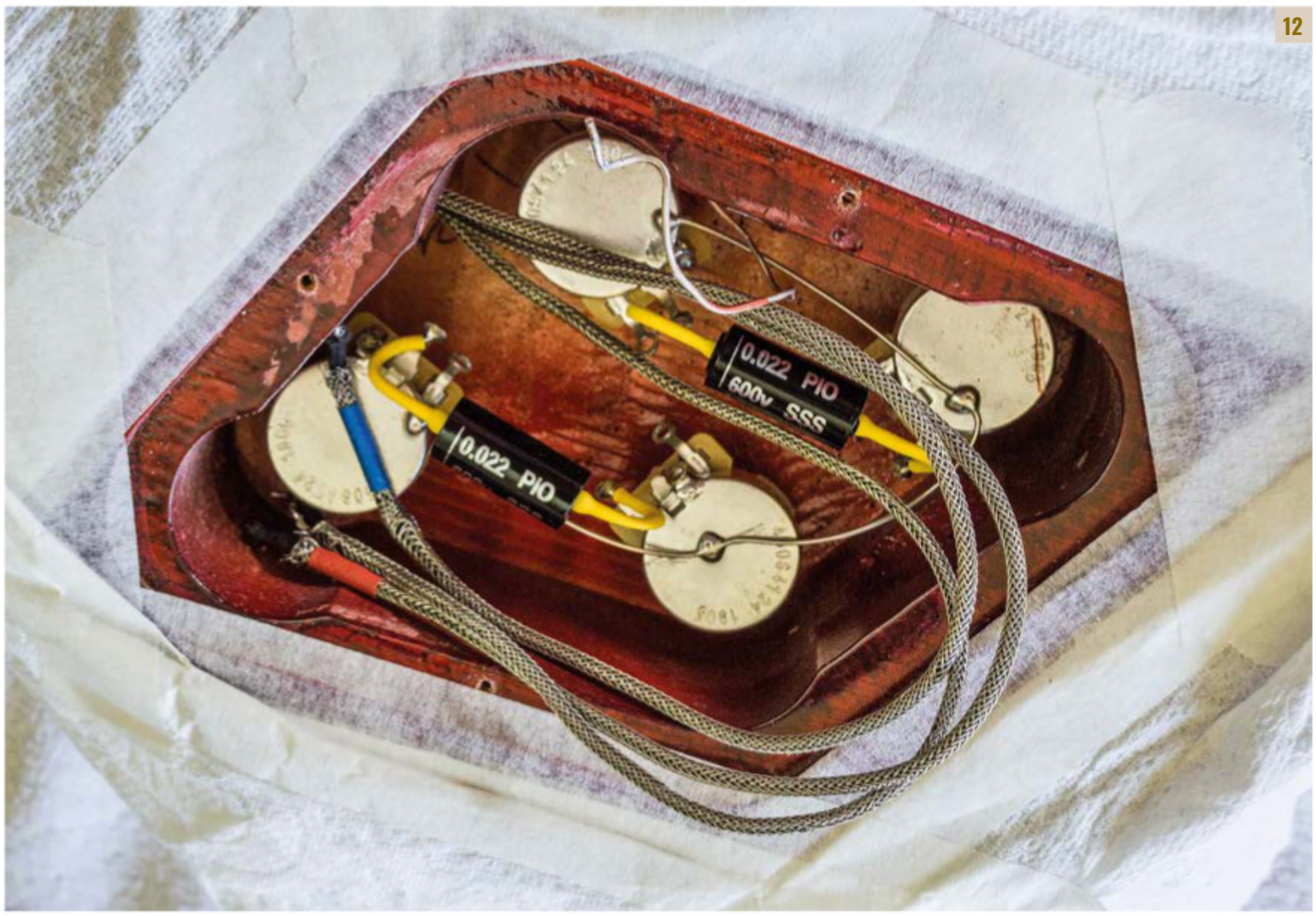

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7 We recommend using the correct tool to remove and reinstate the switch's knurled nut

8 The switch is taken out of its cavity and the wires are pulled out with it

9 We're fitting the Six String Supplies Les Paul harness to this guitar but this shot of the Jimmy Page harness illustrates just how complex the wiring is

10 We use a half-inch socket to remove and reinstate the potentiometer nuts

11 The prewired switch is secured in place and the wires can now be threaded through the body

12 The switch wires emerging into the control cavity can now be soldered onto the volume pots

Congratulations, you've turned your guitar into a husk. Now you have carte blanche to do whatever you want to it.

TAKING BACK CONTROLS

Getting a prewired harness into a guitar is a little trickier than mounting individual components. It's best to work with the top facing upwards and lift the controls in from underneath – each pot has a star washer over its shaft to prevent it from spinning once it's been bolted down, and if the pot shafts are lifted up into the holes, gravity will help you keep the star washers where they're meant to be.

Hold the controls in place with one hand and use the other to slip the pointer washers and nuts over the pot shafts, and turn each until the nuts have grabbed onto the threads. With the pointer washers and nuts now attached and both hands free, employ a half-inch socket to tighten them further, making sure the pointers line up. Tightening by hand is fine too. You don't need to crank them right up with a wrench handle attached to the socket – we're talking potentiometers here, not cylinder heads.

Keep the ground wire that leads from the tailpiece posts tucked safely away to one side throughout your work until it's eventually time to reattach it to one of the control pot casings – the neck volume pot being the usual spot. Melt a small amount of solder onto the pot casing, press the ground wire into the solder using the iron tip, and add a little more solder. Use a flat-head screwdriver to hold the wire down as the solder cools.

SWITCH SWITCHING

For this project, we're installing a Six String Supplies pre-wired Switchcraft switch that comes with colour-coded hookup wires. Look inside the switch cavity and you'll see the opening of a channel that runs through both pickup routs and leads to the controls. The wires go into the channel first and should emerge in the neck pickup rout.

You can pull gently on the wires as the switch is introduced into the cavity. It's a tight fit so remove the switch tip first. You may need to bend the wires slightly near the switch too. Once it's in position, place the poker chip over the switch and screw the knurled nut onto the switch to secure it.

We had to re-use the original knurled nut because it had more depth than the one that came with the Six String Supplies kit, and

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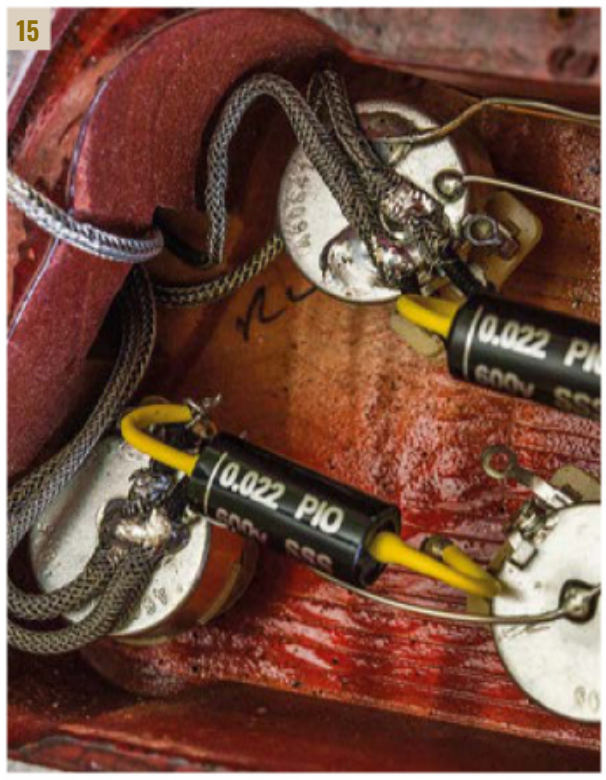

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this LP Traditional needed it. If you bought that Allparts toggle-switch box spanner, you can use it to tighten the switch in place.

Feed the switch wires through the body and they'll emerge into the control cavity. The yellow tagged cable connects to the output jack, so bend it back and tape it out of the way for now. The red and blue tagged wires go to the neck and bridge, respectively.

If you're connecting up a switch that you wired yourself, make the jack-socket wire noticeably longer. You can then use the continuity setting on a multimeter to determine which wires correspond with the neck and bridge switch positions.

Assuming you're working with vintage-style braided wire, melt some solder onto the top of the two volume pot casings before attempting to connect the switch wires. Cut the wires to length – leaving some additional wiggle room – and draw back the braid to expose about 10mm of the black cloth-covered wire inside.

Draw back the cloth covering to expose a few millimetres of wire, twist the strands together and tin the wire by melting solder into the strands. Tin the braid wire in the area where it will ground against the pot casing too. Solder the signal wire onto the centre tag of the volume pot first, then melt solder onto the braid as you use the iron tip to press it tightly against the pot.

When the solder flows, press the braided wire down with a flat-head screwdriver, remove the soldering iron, and allow the solder to cool. With both switch wires soldered to the volume pots, it's finally time to install the pickups.

PICKUP HOOK UP

The procedure for wiring the pickups onto the volume pots is almost identical to that of the switch wiring, the most significant difference being that the signal wires are soldered to the outside tags. Start with the neck pickup, feeding the wire through to the controls and fixing it in position with the surround screws. Then, flip the guitar over, solder the wire onto the appropriate volume pot – the one that's nearest the bridge – and repeat the procedure for the bridge pickup.

To complete the installation, slip a plastic tube over the jack wire, which has until now been taped out of the way – about 120mm of mains-cable insulation stripped off the wires is ideal. Now feed the end of the wire through the hole for the output jack, solder the wire back onto the jack socket, and screw the mounting plate back onto the body.

You're done. We'll leave you with this last bit of advice: save yourself a massive headache by checking that the circuit works *before* you restring your guitar. G

13 The ground wire from the tailpiece bushing is soldered onto the neck volume potentiometer

14 With the jack wire taped out of the way, the other two switch wires are soldered to the volume pots

15 The pickups are reinstated, and the wires are soldered to the volume pots

16 Finally, the insulation can be slipped over the jack wire. Once it's connected to the jack, the rewire is complete

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AMPLIFIER FAQ

This month, Rift Amplification head honcho Chris Fantana explains the difference between gain, overdrive and distortion

Have a burning question about your amp or, worse still, a burning amp? Email us at editors@guitar.com

ABOVE Gain, boost, overdrive, distortion... what does it all mean? Even some amp and pedaldesigners struggle to explain the difference

I've long been confused by a subject that you can hopefully shed some light on. Everyone seems to use the terms gain, overdrive, and distortion interchangeably. But surely there's a difference between them?
TONY, BIRMINGHAM

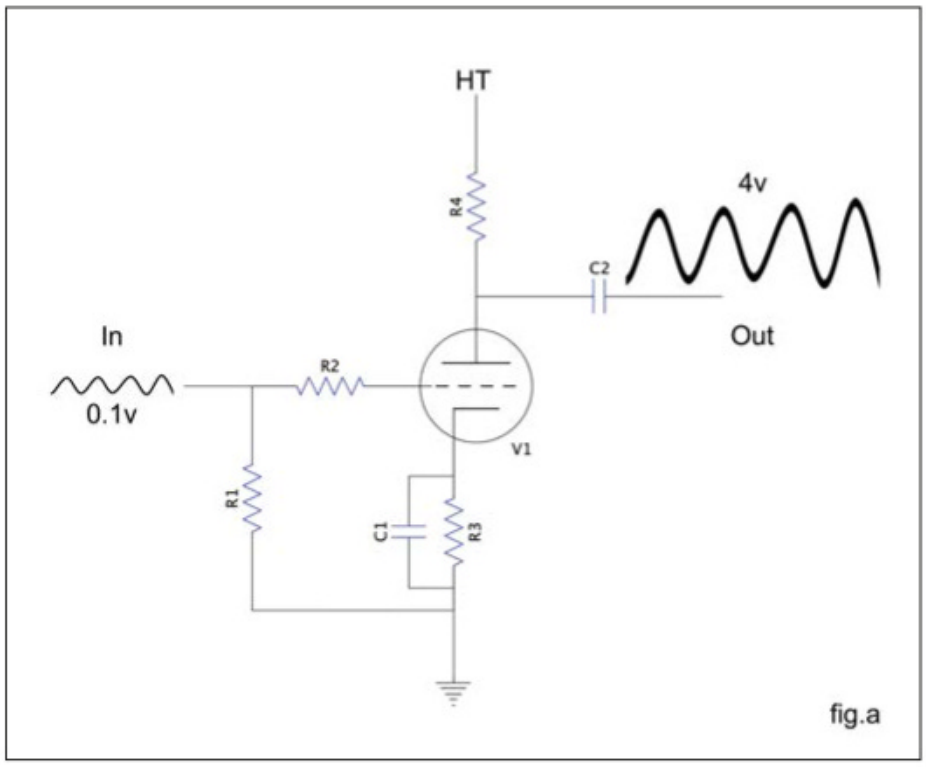
Thanks for getting in touch, Tony, and what a great question. You're correct: these things are different. Thanks in part to the questionable labelling of control panels and the blossoming boutique-pedal market, we seem to be using the terms interchangeably increasingly often. All the while, any true understanding of what they mean (or meant) seems to be slipping away. But there are important distinctions to be made here.

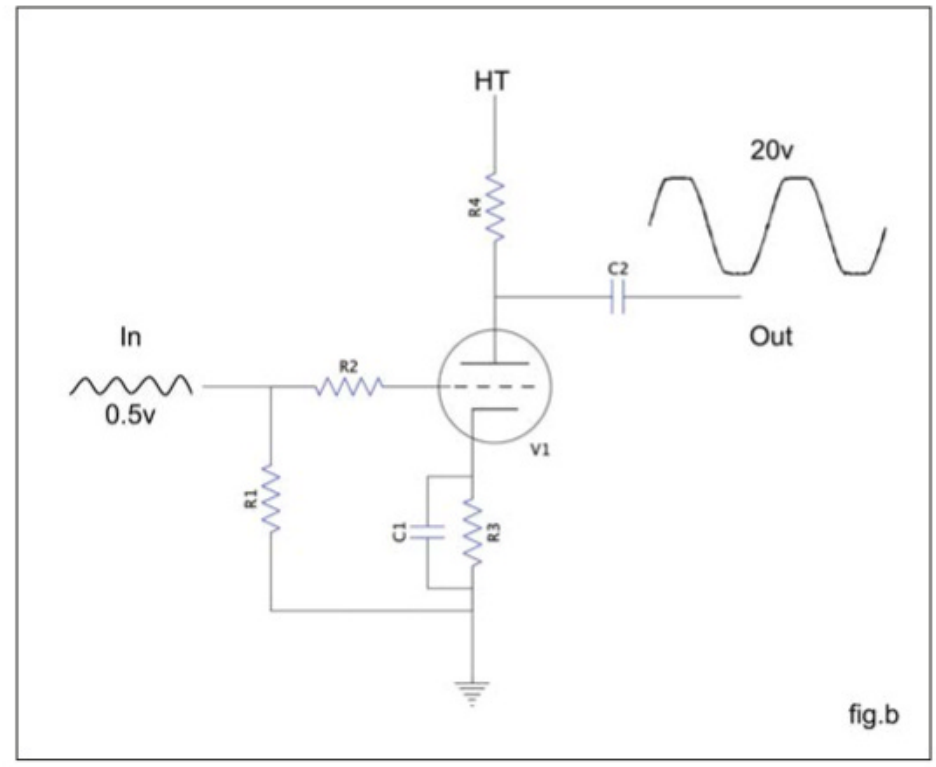
Firstly, let's turn up the gain – or, more precisely, the voltage gain. This is the measure of how much a gain stage amplifies a signal, and is expressed as a factor.

Figure A (opposite) shows a typical input stage found in most guitar amplifiers. The guitar signal enters on the left, passes through R2 and into the control grid of the valve (V1). The signal is then amplified by the valve and exits by the anode at the top via C2. At this point, you can see that the signal has increased in size (or amplitude) from 0.1 to four volts, a 40-times increase.

You can then say that this amplifier stage has a gain factor of 40. That value will remain the same, and is dictated by all the components in the circuit, the HT voltage applied at R4, and the valve model itself. If you were to double the size of the input voltage to, let's say, 0.2 volts, then your output voltage would still be 40 times that, now eight volts.

This doesn't have to be a valve circuit, however. It could be a transistor commonly found in simple, clean boost pedals and the like – they all do the same job of increasing the size of your guitar signal, they just do it in different ways.





Gain stages are not perfect though. They have limits and, if pushed beyond them, begin to fall apart. Ideally, you would be able to inject any size signal into the stage and receive a signal that was identical in every way other than its increased amplitude. Unfortunately, this can never be the case. When a gain stage can no longer accurately replicate your input signal perfectly, you're in a state of overdrive.

Figure B illustrates a 0.5 volt signal injected into a gain stage. The stage has done its best to amplify the signal as cleanly as it can but has reached its limit, which has resulted in the output signal being altered. You can see that the sine wave is now clipped at the top and bottom, despite still being 40 times larger. The gain stage is no longer operating as designed, it's overdriving.

If this was a hi-fi, it would sound awful. In a guitar amplifier, however, the resulting change is usually quite pleasing to the ear. Strange world, eh?

Distortion occurs when the signal changes altogether. Comparing the output to the input signal, you can see how much it has changed or distorted. This is usually expressed as a percentage. For example, you might say that the output signal has 10 per cent distortion when compared to the input.

How does this work in the real world? Let's say I wanted to release my own line of effects pedals – one gain pedal, one overdrive pedal, one distortion pedal.

The gain unit would focus on increasing the size of your guitar signal as much as possible without changing its tone. These are usually referred to as transparent boosts.

The overdrive pedal would manipulate your signal to achieve a certain sound, tone or feel. I might choose to filter certain frequencies and have them drive more than others. I could include an interactive EQ to help the player dial in a sound to their application. Classic pedals that do this include the Ibanez Tube Screamer and Analog Man's King Of Tone.

The distortion pedal would focus on changing the sound as much as possible with little regard for the original signal – think fuzz and heavy distortions such as the Boss Metal Zone and Way Huge's Swollen Pickle.

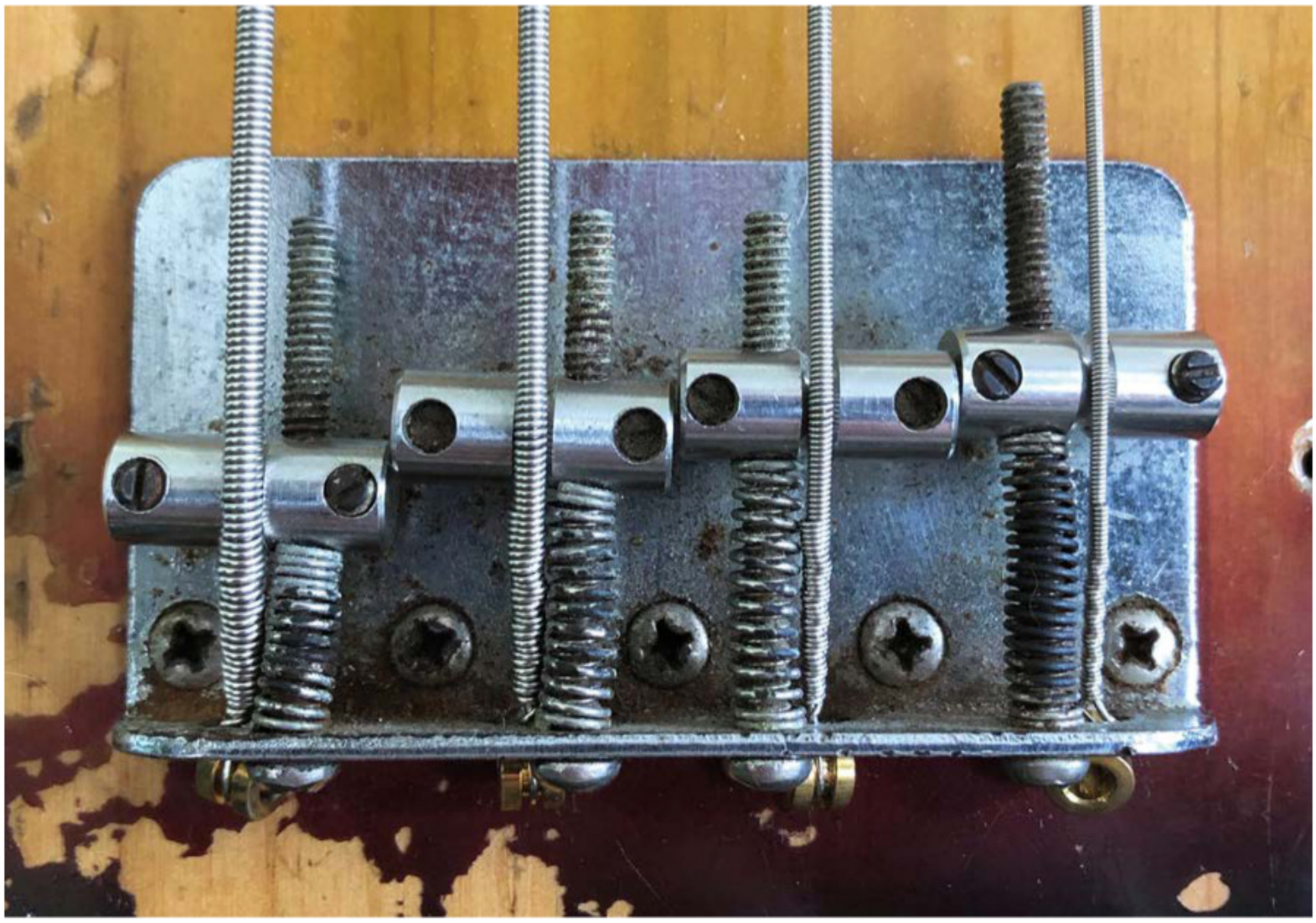
Hopefully, I've managed to shed some light on the differences between the three terms. Now break out your guitar, turn up the gain, overdrive the amp and let the distortion ring out. G

Visit riftamps.com for more on Rift's range of British-built boutique amplifiers

FIGURE A In this example of a typical amplifier input stage, an input signal of 0.1 volts is amplified to four volts – an increase of 40 times

FIGURE B Here, the gain stage has reached its limit, and the signal has been amplified but not cleanly, resulting in overdrive

Seymour Duncan



Most electric guitars and basses have adjustable saddles of some description, and these are the key to getting your instrument perfectly intonated

TECH TALK
GUITAR INTONATION

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL JAMES ADAMS

In the latest instalment of his column, Michael James Adams attempts to demystify the murky world of intonation

Whether you know how to set it or not, the chances are you're at least aware of the importance of intonation, especially if you record frequently or play with others. If things sound fine in the root position but start to sour as you slide up the neck, or if your guitar sounds okay on its own but notes begin to clash when you're jamming with other musicians, it might be a sign that your intonation needs adjusting.

Remember Pythagoras, the guy with the famous theorem about triangles that you learnt about in maths class? Pythagorean theory dictates that the note played on a string is inversely proportional to its length. For instance, if you halve the length of a string, it'll be the same note as the open string, only an octave higher. The equal-temperament system chops up the octave accordingly into the familiar chromatic scale of 12 half steps.

SOUNDS GOOD, RIGHT?

Not always. Tuning a guitar is something of a compromise and, with vintage-style instruments, unfortunately there's no entirely foolproof method of obtaining perfect-sounding notes and chords in all positions on the neck. At least, not in our imperfect physical world in which strings vary in thickness and tension, the act of fretting a note bends a string slightly sharp, and plenty of bridges were designed with a wound G-string in mind.

If you pluck an open E on the sixth string, it should be in tune with the note you play on the same string at the 12th fret. But that's just a single string – once you introduce multiple voicings across the fretboard, things start to get tricky. This is why we intonate each string differently, to maximise the harmonic agreement across all the strings.

We've learnt to live with the shortcomings of our beloved instrument. After all, the overwhelming majority of Western pop records made over the past 100 years have slightly out of tune guitars all over them, and many of us are subconsciously compensating when we play. There are also plenty of genres in which a little ambiguity or dissonance goes a long way. That said, why not give your guitar the best possible chance of being in tune by setting its intonation correctly?

There are many systems out there that can make guitars and basses sound as in-tune as possible, including the Buzz Feiten system, the Earvana nut, True Temperament frets, and the 'sweetened' tuning programs included on Petersen tuners. These are all fine and, if your ear demands the utmost in precision, you should explore them. For the purposes of this article, though, we'll be ignoring them in favour of the most widely available tools and traditional guitar types.

GETTING STARTED

On most electric guitars and basses, intonation is adjustable at the bridge. To set intonation, you'll need to find the screw that allows you to change the position of the saddle and therefore the length of the string. On a Strat or a guitar equipped with a tune-o-matic bridge, each of the six saddles has a screw that sets its position. On a traditional Telecaster, though, there are only three barrel saddles, and each saddle sets intonation for two strings with the adjustment screw in between them.

Note: adjusting the intonation of an acoustic guitar usually requires careful filing of the saddle and is best left to professional guitar techs.

You'll only need a few basic tools to do the job: a screwdriver, flat- or cross-head, depending on your guitar; the necessary tools to set string height, such as an Allen key; and a sensitive guitar tuner, preferably a strobe tuner if you have one. For this job, you'll want the most accurate tuner you can possibly get your hands on, as we'll be making incremental changes.

ABOVE LEFT First you'll want to tune your guitar so the harmonic note played at the 12th fret is perfectly in tune for each string

ABOVE RIGHT Once that's done, depress the note at the 12th and compare with the harmonic. If there's a discrepancy, you'll need to move the saddle back or forward to compensate

RIGHT The goal is to get both depressed and harmonic perfectly in tune with each other – though you should tune to what sounds 'right' for your ear and playing style

It helps to install a fresh set of unplayed strings before you begin. Strings that have been played form divots or flat spots on the bottom as a result of them being pressed against the frets and vibrating against their saddles. Unsurprisingly, these divots can make it difficult if not impossible to zero in on perfect intonation.

Assuming your guitar is already properly set up, let's get started.

CHECKING INTONATION

To check intonation, begin by tuning your guitar so that the harmonic note at the 12th fret is perfectly in tune on each string. For those unaware, that's the note you can sound by lightly touching but not depressing the string, directly above the fret itself.

Then, depress the string at the 12th fret and compare it to the 12th-fret harmonic. If the fretted note is different from the harmonic, you'll need to adjust the saddle. Unsure of which way to move the saddle? No problem: if the fretted note is sharp, move the saddle backward (away from the neck); if the fretted note is flat, move the saddle forward (towards the neck).

Going one string at a time, repeat this process as many times as necessary until you have the saddle in the right spot. We recommend tweaking by just a fraction of a turn if it's your first time. It's also a good idea to detune the string before each adjustment to ensure that you don't flatten the bottom of the string with the back-and-forth motion of the saddle, then retune and move onto the next string.

TRUST YOUR EARS

Sometimes being perfectly intonated can still sound a little off, and that comes down to the way your guitar is set up or outfitted. Take three-saddle Telecaster bridges: to get them set up so that the strings play nicely with each other, you'll need to walk the tightrope when dealing with a pair that share a saddle. A little sharp here and a little flat there, and you can get the tuning into an agreeable window.

There's also the matter of making sure the instrument works with its owner's approach. If you're an especially heavy-handed player, it can be good practice to intonate the low E string slightly flat. That way, your hard-hitting technique won't cause the lower register to pull sharp with pick attack. This goes double for pummelling performers who pitch down more than a half step.

If you can tune by ear, you should hear if something sounds off. Sometimes we have to fudge a guitar's intonation to make it sound 'right', in the same way piano tuners 'stretch' so that their pianos play in tune across all keys. When overdubbing guitar parts in the studio, it's common to tune your guitar to the track as, despite what the tuner says, that high-register arpeggio may be clashing with the cowboy chords in the rhythm part.

Hopefully this primer gives you the courage to have a crack at setting intonation yourself. Good luck and trust your ears. G

For much more where this came from, follow Mike on Instagram @puisheen

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Jared James Nichols gets a lot of mileage from the single P-90 in his signature guitar

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ESSENTIAL BLUES LESSONS

PLAY BLUES LIKE **JARED JAMES NICHOLS**

WORDS LEIGH FUGE

The kinetic fingerstyle of Jared James Nichols has made him a modern blues colossus. Here's how to make it your own

As you can tell from our interview with the man himself (see p38), Jared James Nichols is not one to overcomplicate things when it comes to guitar playing. All he needs in order to conjure some of the world's most incendiary blues-rock licks is a single-pickup Les Paul, a snarling Blackstar amp, a Klon and his almighty fingers.

Smashing together elements of Jeff Beck and Zakk Wylde with a smattering of Leslie West thrown in for good measure, Nichols has stepped into the limelight in the past few years, and it's no surprise that everybody from Joe Bonamassa to Joe Perry wants to jam with the 30-year-old Wisconsinite.

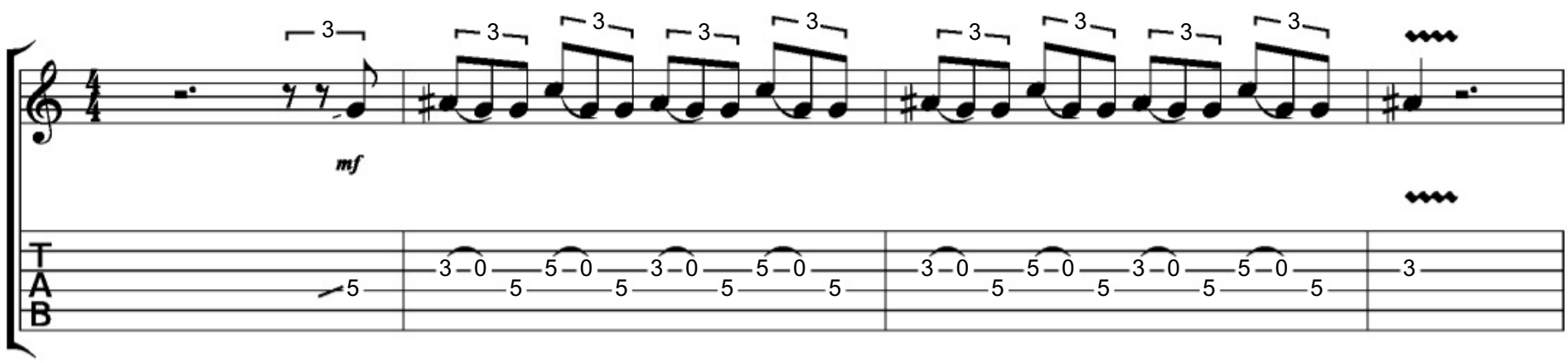
Here we're going to teach you five licks that run the gamut of Nichols' scorching blues style. All can be played with a pick if that's more comfortable for you but for the full JJN experience, crank up the gain and dig in hard with your thumb and fingers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leigh Fuge is a guitar teacher and professional musician from Swansea in the UK. He has taught hundreds of students face to face and via the MGR Music platform. He has more than 10 years' experience in the industry.
mgrmusic.com

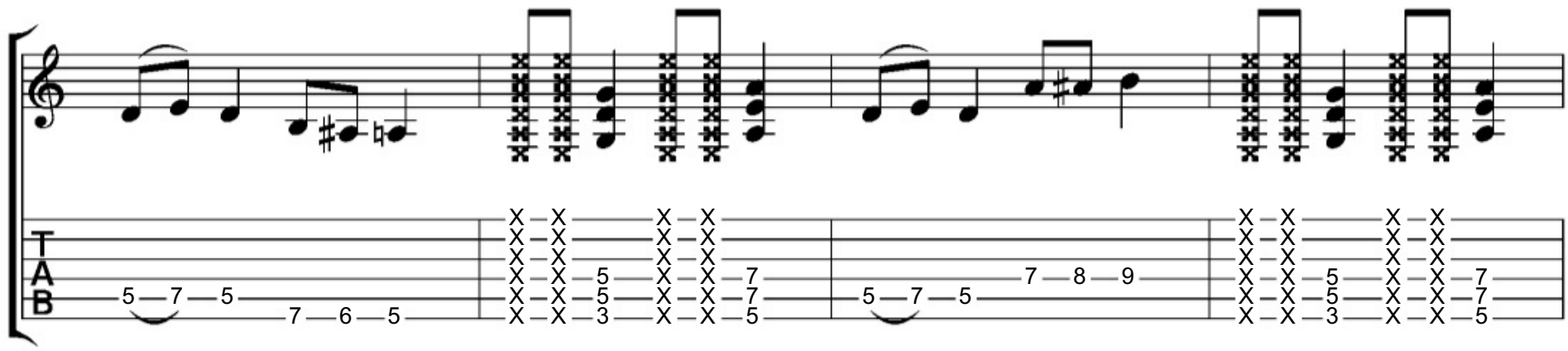
LICK 1

These banjo roll-style licks are one of the hallmarks of Jared's playing. This pattern is a repeated triplet phrase and it's easy to get going once you lock into the rhythm. It's taken from the E minor pentatonic scale, second position with the 3rd fret on the G being the B5, the famous 'blue note'. If you're going to play this fingerstyle, play the D string with your thumb and the pull-offs on the G with your index finger.



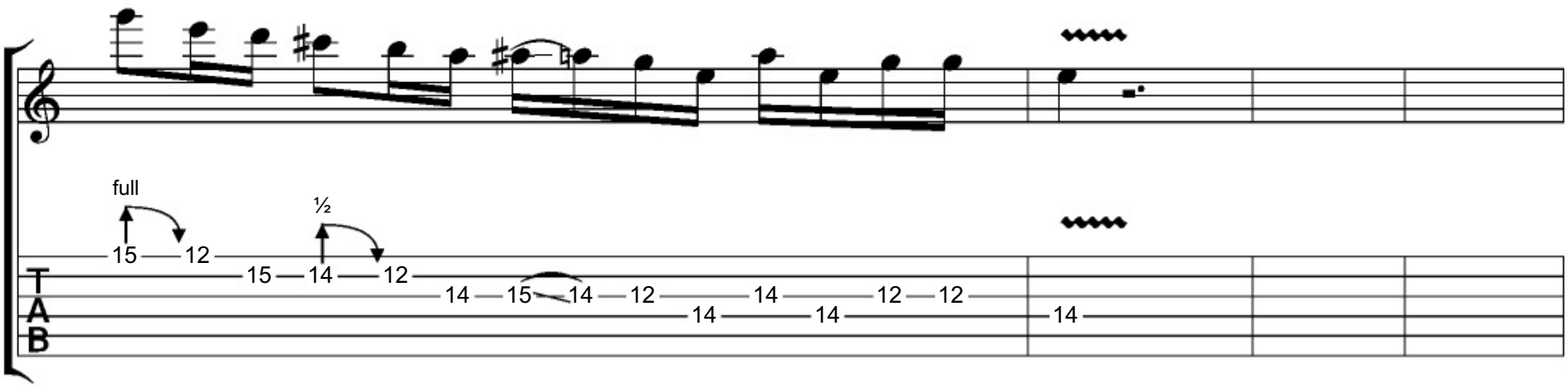
LICK 2

When it comes to riffs, Jared is all about groove. While this is a relatively simple pattern, nailing it requires emphasising the rhythm and feel. The rhythm is a combination of eighth notes on beats 1 and 3, and quarter notes on beats 2 and 4. To keep the groove intact, play it loosely without straying far from the beat.



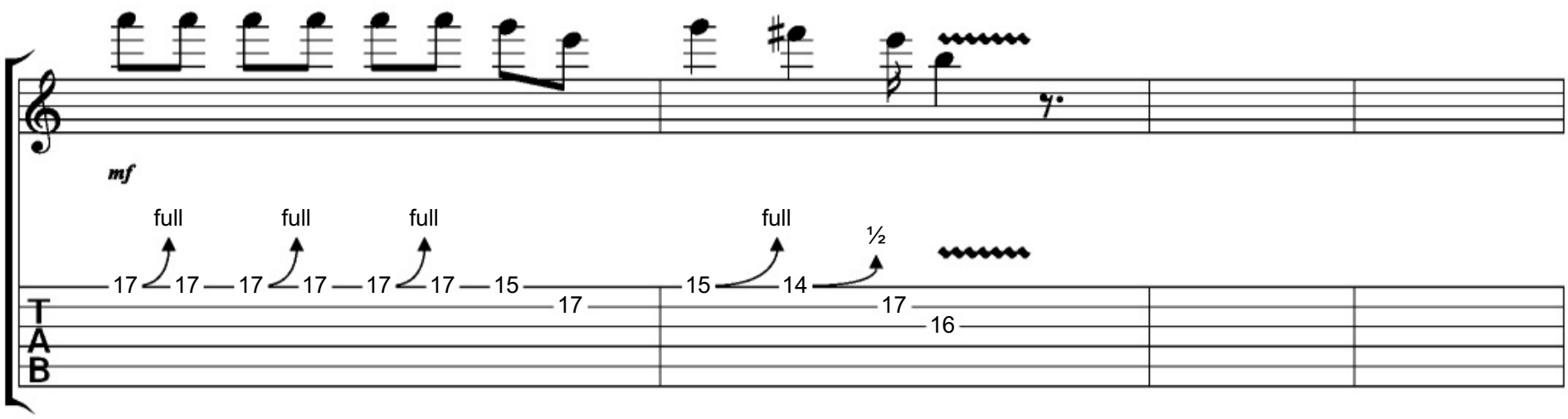
LICK 3

Speedy pentatonic licks should be foundational principles for any blues-rocker. This lick has some lovely pre-bends and swift descending runs. Use the E minor pentatonic, and throw in the B5, this time on the 15th fret on the G string. The first two beats are made up of an eighth note pre-bend and release, and two descending 16th notes. The final two beats are 16th-note runs down the scale.



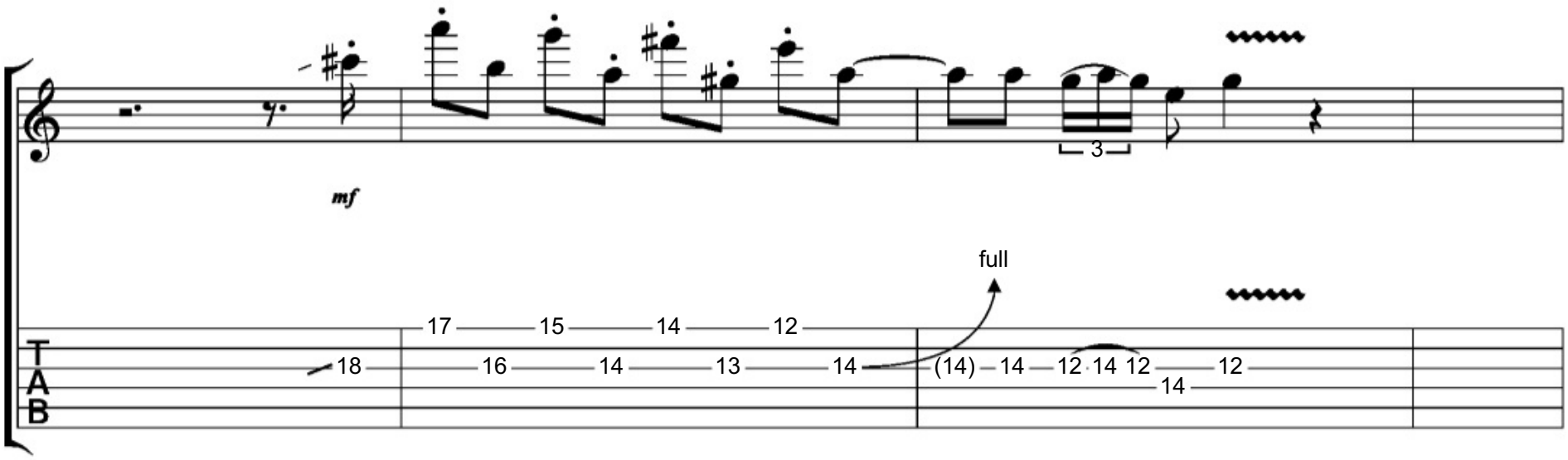
LICK 4

Get your guitar faces ready because this riff will make you gurn. Using the E minor pentatonic, get high on the E string with shape two. The first three bars are played as straight eighth notes with a full-step bend on beats 1, 2 and 3. In between these beats, release the bend and play only the fretted note. Try to mute the string bend before releasing so that you don't hear the release. The two bends in bar 2 are each a quarter-note long. Bend them slowly upwards with lots of feel to make it sing.



LICK 5

Jared's country influences form another important part of his style and he often makes use of descending minor sixths such as these in pentatonic runs. Push the starting note a little. Don't worry if it feels rushed, that's normal. Bar 2 features straight eighth notes but keep them staccato to lend the lick some urgency.



TRY IT YOURSELF

Each of these licks is based around the E minor pentatonic scale using the first and second shapes, but feel free to move them around to see how they work in other keys. Give these a go using your fingers. It really helps with the overall feel and you might even like it!

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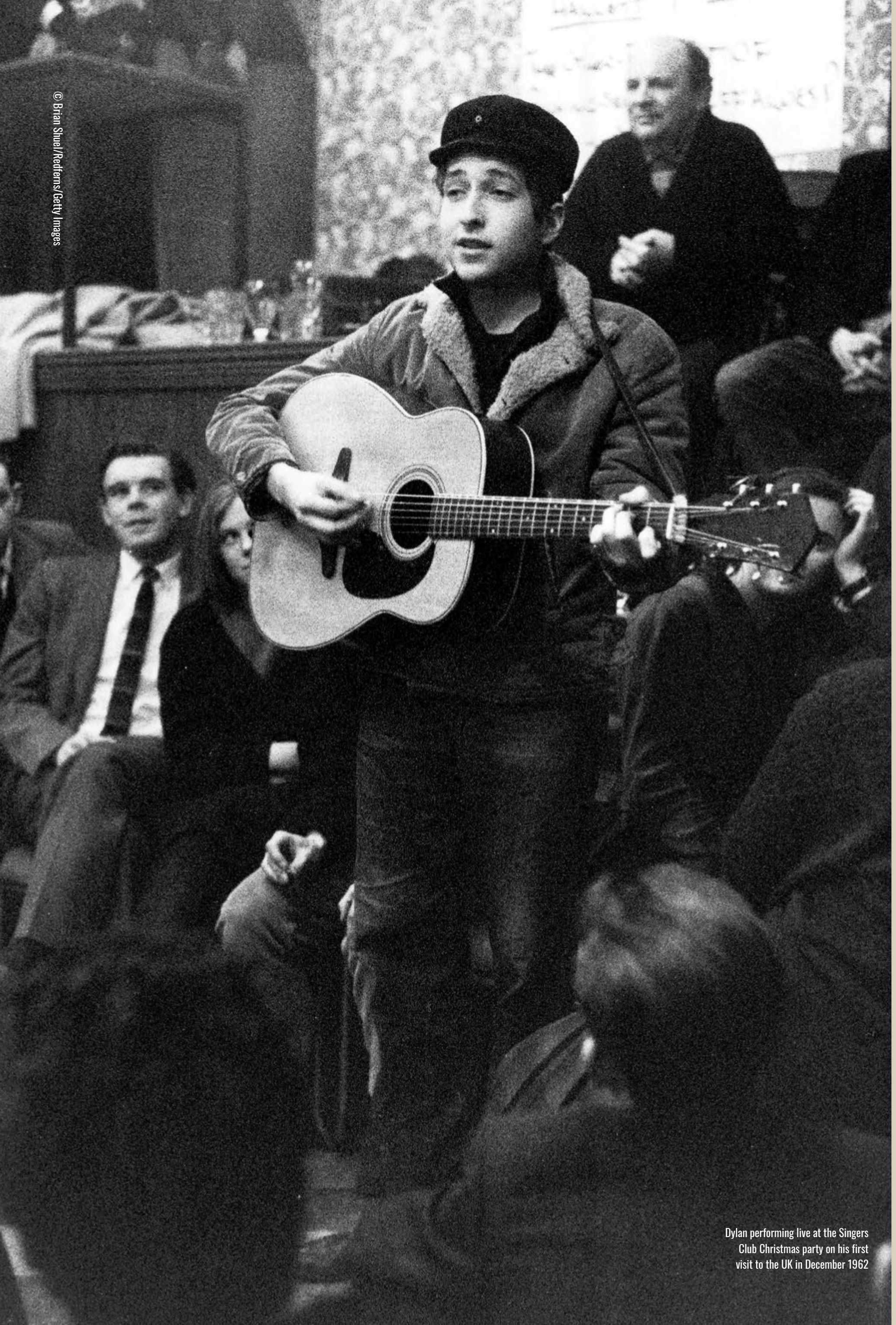

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Dylan performing live at the Singers Club Christmas party on his first visit to the UK in December 1962

CHORD CLINIC

HOW TO PLAY CHORDS LIKE BOB DYLAN PART 1

WORDS ROD FOGG

Dylan's back catalogue is a monolith in the history of popular music, and the way he used chords in his early days as an acoustic troubadour remains as interesting and instructive today as it ever was

As anyone who has witnessed the almost unrecognisable reworkings of classic tracks in his live shows can attest, Bob Dylan is an icon who refuses to conform to expectations.

But what those adaptations of his own epochal works demonstrate is that, when you have a timeless bedrock of melody and structure, you can take a song almost anywhere. Here, however, we're eschewing the avant-garde and approaching the shapes and progressions that early Dylan rode to stardom, aided by nothing more than a steel-string acoustic, a harmonica and that glorious weather-worn voice.

FIGURE 1 DROP D

For these examples, you need to put the guitar in drop D tuning. Hit the low E string (now a D, of course) of the D chord with a fairly fast strumming pattern, before quickly switching to the C almost as a passing chord for a few beats and then going back to the D. This sounds like a nice intro and you could pair it with bars of D, C and G/B. G/B is what we call a slash chord, meaning a G major chord with the note B in the bass. Be careful to mute the unwanted notes and avoid catching the sixth string when playing the C chord. You can mute it by letting your thumb come up over the edge of the neck or by using the tip of your third finger.

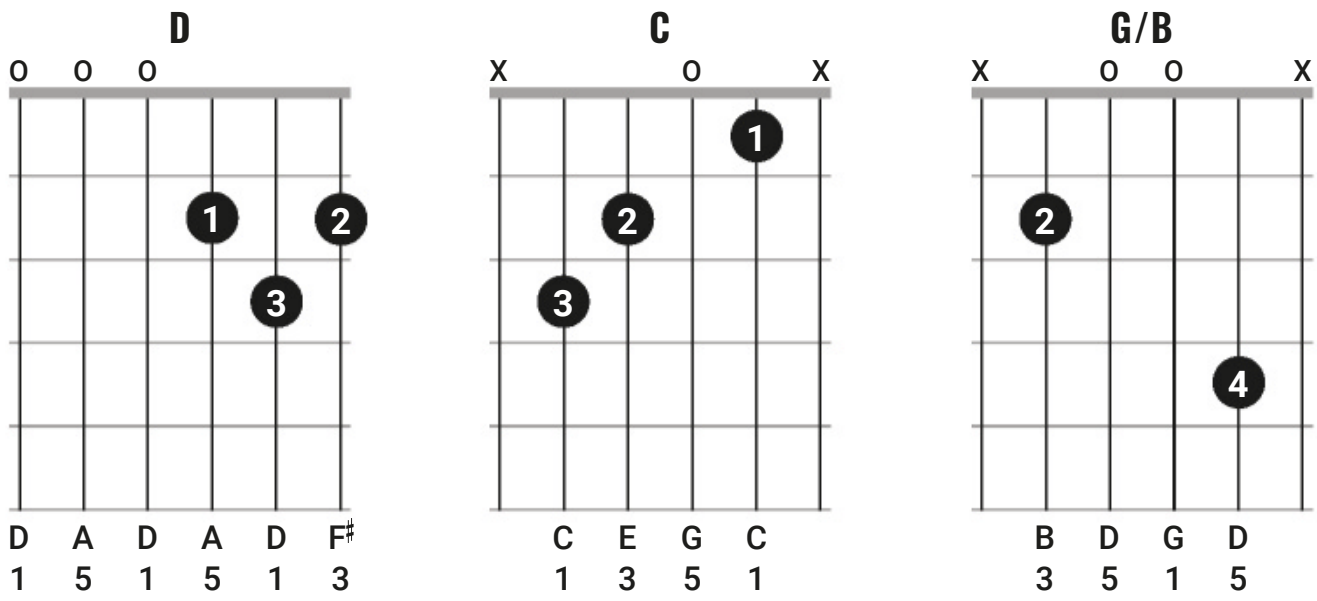


FIGURE 2 DROP D

Staying in drop D, start with the open D chord from figure 1 but this time switch to another slash chord, G5/D, instead. Try hammering on with your fourth finger just after you first strum this chord. You could also alternate between the D chord and the second G shape, the third finger can be angled back so that it mutes the A string. Try this with a capo at the second fret for increased brightness and a more authentic Dylan vibe. The iconic songwriter rarely plays all six strings with a single pick stroke. He's much more likely to pick the bass note and then strum the upper notes of the chord, creating a two-part, chords-with-bass accompaniment style.

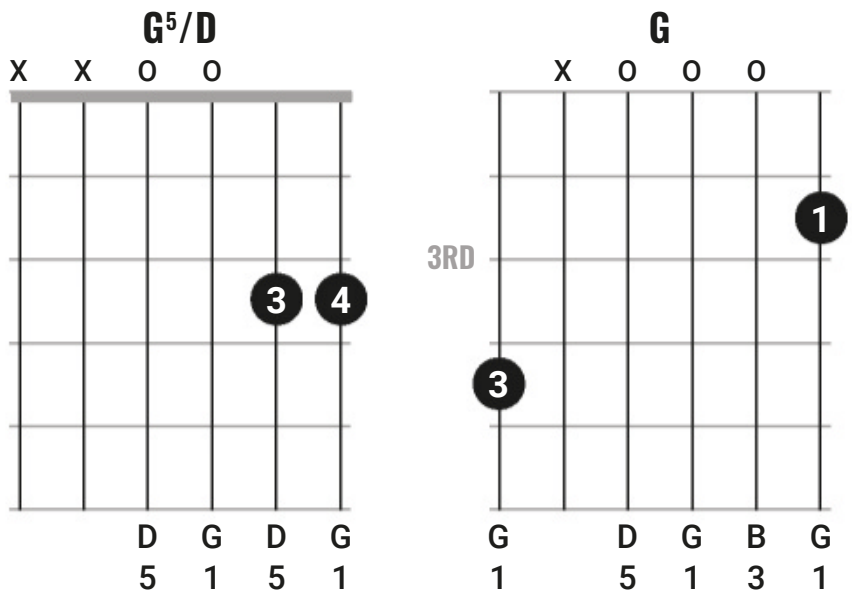


FIGURE 3 STANDARD TUNING

Anybody who expects Dylan to be all open-string cowboy chords needs to get to grips with this example. Even from the start, it was clear he knew plenty of chords, including some uncommon voicings. Play the first four chords of figure 3 using the technique of separating the bass note and strumming the top notes outlined already. Watch out for the tricky F/C chord, based on an open D shape moved three frets up the guitar. You could anticipate this by using fingers two, three and four to play the D major chord and then sliding them along the strings. Use the underside of your index finger to mute the open A and D strings when playing that quirky A/C# chord.

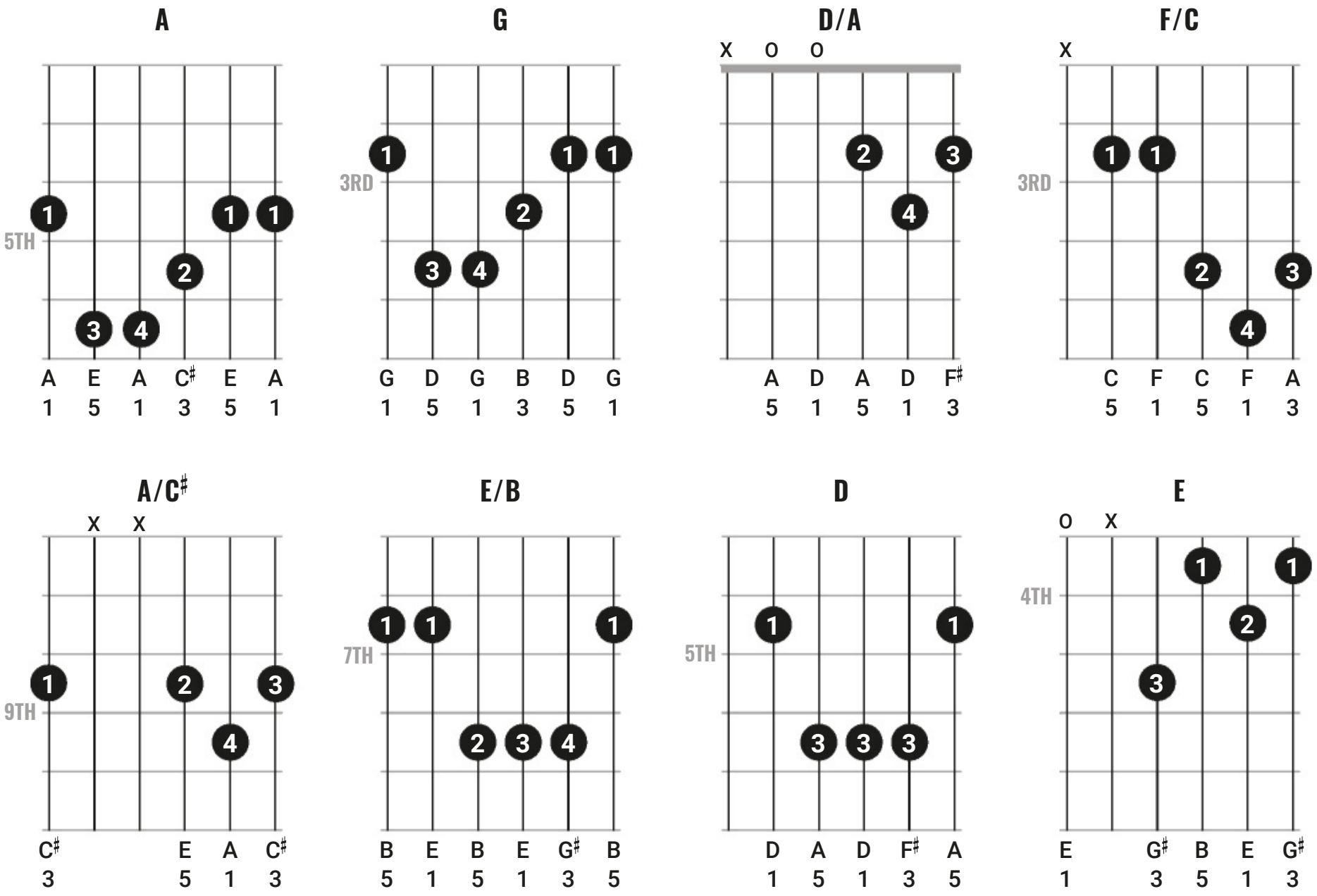
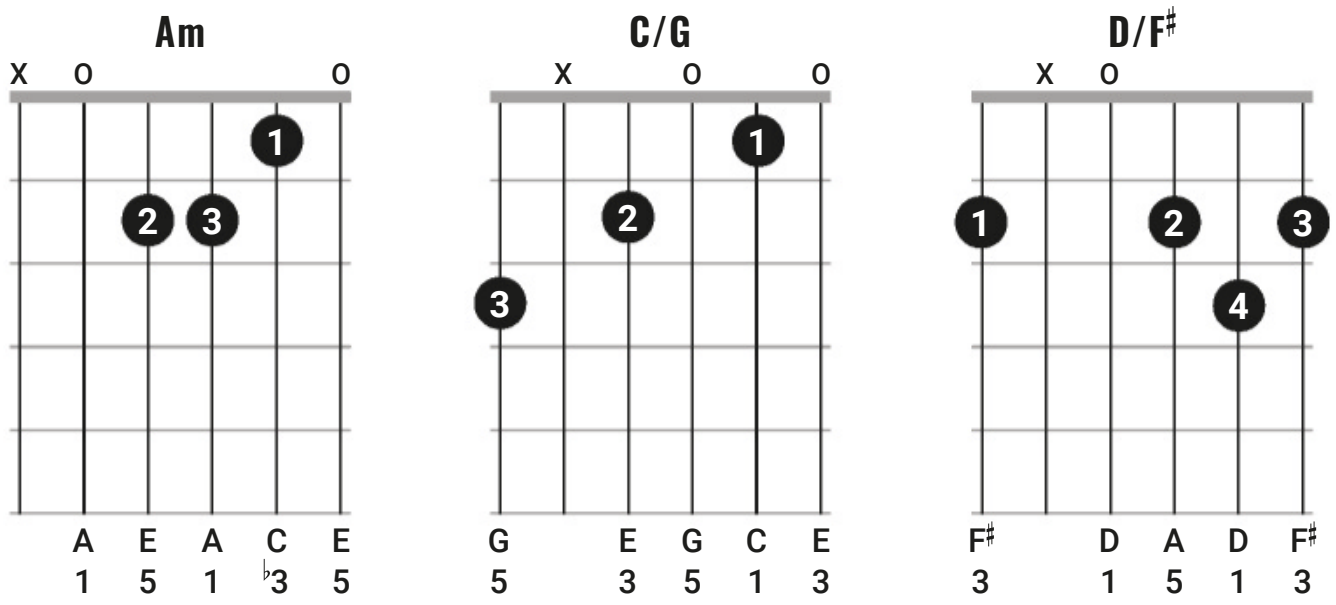


FIGURE 4 STANDARD TUNING

In this example, the chords have been adapted to create a descending bassline. Try playing it with a folky three-time feel for more of a Dylan flavour. Playing the bass note on the first beat then two downstrokes on the upper notes will help.



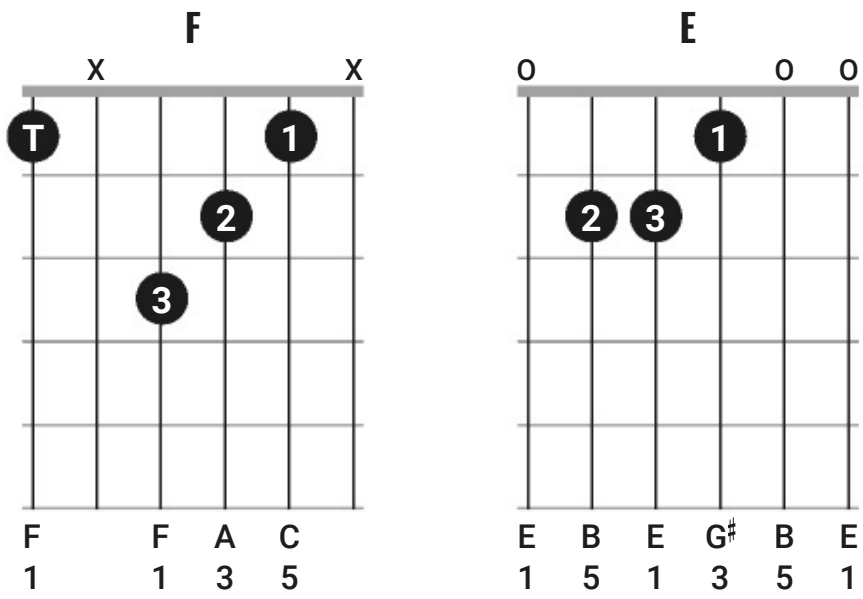
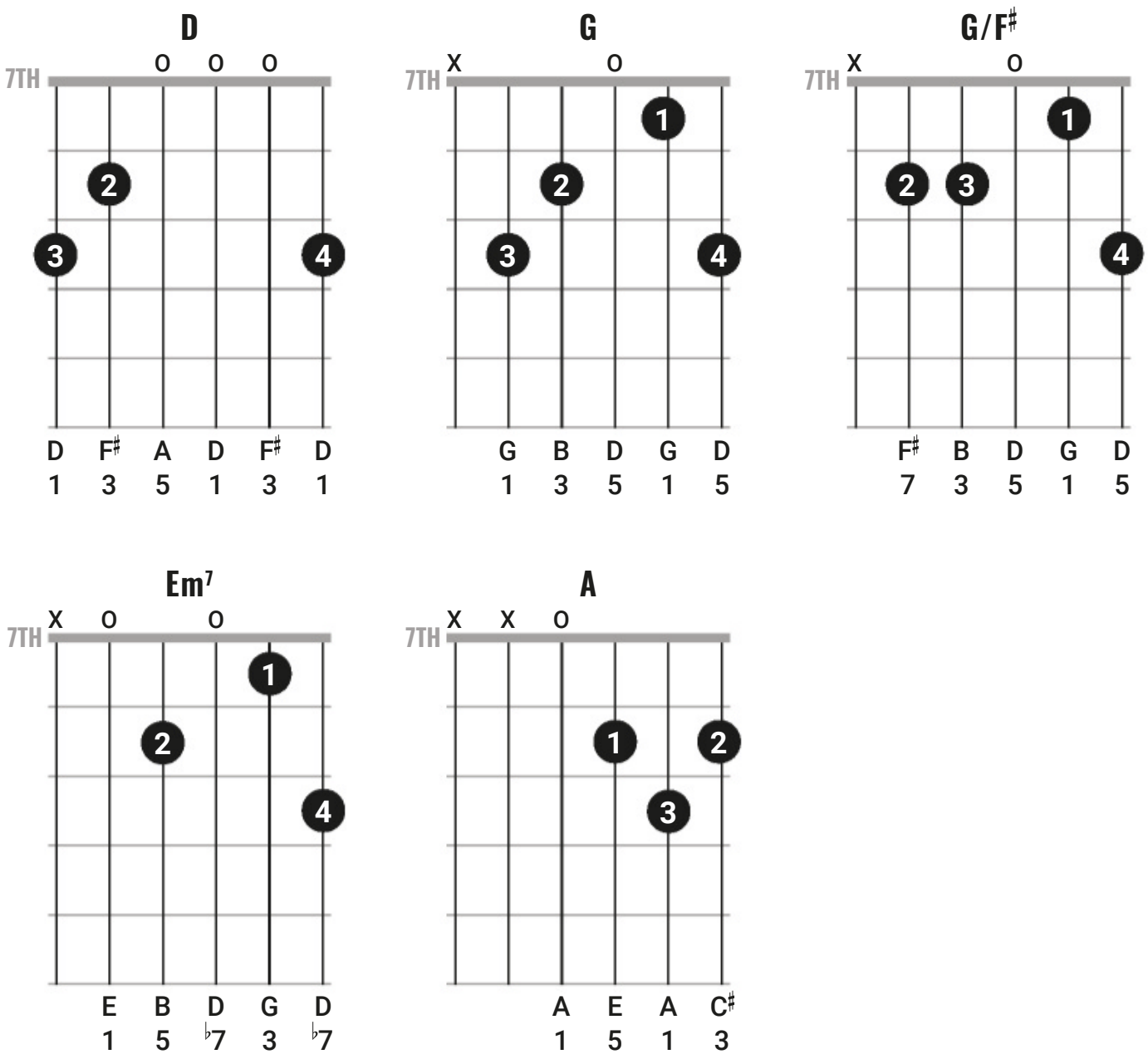


FIGURE 5 CAPO 7TH FRET

With a capo on the seventh fret, regular open-string chords are given a sweet chiming quality. This sequence is another that's enhanced by a separate bassline so, again, be sure to pick the bass note of the chord first and then strum the upper notes. Finger four stays in the same place for the first four chords, so do your best to leave it there and not move it unnecessarily. Master the techniques here and have fun introducing them into your own playing.



TALKBOX

GARY HUSTWIT

INTERVIEW SAM ROBERTS

The filmmaker, photographer, vice-president of Salon.com and Koll Guitars partner talks 1950s Gibsons, Thelonious Monk and getting threatened by Russian thugs

The moment it all started...

"My mom's brother was a luthier and guitar collector. When I was a kid, I used to go to his shop during the summer and apprentice there. He would teach me about instruments, repairing things and going out on buying trips. I started learning how to play, and buying and selling guitars. When I came back to California, I started putting classified ads in the local newspapers. People would come to me and find this 12-year-old kid being like, 'Yeah, okay, I'll give you 400 bucks for that D-18'. Throughout high school and college, I would keep my eyes open for things at flea markets. I remember finding a late-40s Martin 0-17 for about 100 bucks!"

I couldn't live without my...

"I have a '56 Gibson J-45 that's beat to hell but sounds so good and so broken-in. It feels like an old pair of blue jeans. It's so comfortable and, when I pick it up, I just want to tune everything else out and strum and play songs."

The one that got away...

"My first guitar was a Martin 0-16NY that my uncle gave me when I was 13 years old. At the time, I didn't appreciate it. Shortly thereafter I started listening to Led Zeppelin and wanted an electric, so I traded it in at a Guitar Center and got some crappy Peavey or something ridiculous. I'd love to find that Martin. I had a '67 Telecaster that I let go in college, for rent money or something stupid. I could list another 10 guitars that I wish I hadn't sold."

My signature model would be...

"About 10 years ago, it would have been a 000 acoustic, Brazilian back and sides and an Adirondack top, something like that. Now, I think it would probably be a thin mahogany solidbody, like a Koll Junior Glide, maybe a couple of humbuckers and a wrap on it, a Brazilian fretboard, and there you go. Simple, functional, light, phenomenal-sounding, stripping the design down to the essentials. I see a lot of guitars that have design details and ornamentation for no reason, which I'm not into. I like getting rid of distractions."

The first thing I play when I pick up a guitar...

"I strum a few open chords just to get a feel for it. I have a thing that I started doing early on – if I'm in a guitar shop, I'll strum all six strings individually and hear them resonate. I'll go from guitar to guitar while they're on the wall and do that. I love getting that comparison between guitars and I can tell almost immediately, at least with acoustics, that I'm going to like a guitar just from that."

The best advice I've ever been given...

"I've had a million musical influences, bands I've known, guitarists I've watched and been inspired by. Music is my biggest inspiration, even when it comes to film. When I hear music, I see images. When I come up with the idea for a film, I always hear what the soundtrack is first. When I had the idea for the Dieter Rams film, what I was hearing was something like Brian Eno. I managed to get Brian to work on the film with me, which was insane."

My Spinal Tap moment...

"I've never had anything horribly go wrong. I've had various amps blow up or tubes go out but nothing on a *Spinal Tap* level. When filmmaking, though, sure. I've been almost arrested and almost hit by cars many times. I've been threatened by Russian thugs. But no-one was killed. No drummers died."

My guilty pleasure...

"I have an eight-year-old daughter so I listen to lots of Taylor Swift and Rihanna. I do it begrudgingly but sometimes I get into it. There are so many bands from my past that I don't listen to anymore that I look back on and am embarrassed by. But you have to own those moments in your musical history. When I got into punk, I disavowed all my Zeppelin and AC/DC but then, of course, I came back to all that stuff. Never disavow the stuff you loved when you were a kid."

I wish I was there...

"I would love to have seen Thelonious Monk at The Five Spot Café and I would love to have seen Television at CBGB."

If I could just play one thing...

"I'm not a natural player. It takes me a long time to get my fingers to cooperate. I see somebody like Julian Lage and think it's phenomenal the way his fingers channel what his brain comes up with. I could play for 12 hours a day for the rest of my life and never approach that. That level of natural musical talent, I would love to have that."

Gary Hustwit's latest film, *Rams*, is out now.
Follow Gary on Instagram: @gary_hustwit

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